THRILLING
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Featuring:
RUSTLERS' RANGE
Complete Action Novel
By JAMES W. ROUTH
ALL STORIES COMPLETE!
ALSO:
RAY NAFZIGER
CHUCK MARTIN
CLAUDE RISTER
NRA CODE
RAIDERS OF PECOS VALLEY
A Complete Novelette
By JACKSON COLE

This is a place holder for **page 2**

….the advertisement behind the front cover

Put Layers of SOLID MUSCLE on EVERY INCH of YOUR BODY!

Amazing New

Home Training Camp

Gets Remarkable Results

New kind of home gymnasium quickly builds smashing QUICK! muscles and tremendous all-around bodily strength. Rebuilds every muscle. Gives you new stamina, endurance, and never-failing energy. Read the 23 big features; you get—more than ever before offered at this price by anyone, anywhere, at any time!

Do you want a body like this? Read here how easily you can get this kind of body.

LOOK AT ALL YOU GET . . . 23 BIG FEATURES—

1—**Chest Expander**—Ten Cables, 200 lbs. resistance. Adjustable to your particular needs. A quick way to build the kind of chest you have always longed to have.
2—**Adjustable Headgear**—for building sturdy, powerful neck muscles.
3—**Foot Gear**—for ankles and calves.
4—**New Type Hand Grips**—Strengthen fingers, put new force into wrists, forearms.
5—**Patented Stirrup**—Puts new power into legs, muscles of stomach and thighs.
6—**Rowing Machine Attachment**—gives you the back-building advantage of this great sport.
7—**Complete Wall Exerciser Attachments**—for general body development.
8—**Muscle Clock**—Measures your muscle power. Shows what your muscle power is in pounds.
9—**Foot-Gear and Ankle Strengthener**—to put new endurance into your ankles and to lift and strengthen your arches.
10—**Special Skip Rope**—for increasing speed and developing your wind.
11—**20 Famous Wrestling Holds**—clearly pictured and described.
12—**15 Secrets of Jiu Jitsu**—making you the master of any man, regardless of his size.
13—**17 Winning Boxing Positions**—clearly shown in pictures.
14—**10 Feats of Strength**—tricks you can easily do which will amaze everyone.
15—**Tricks of Hand Balancing**—some of the stunts which have astounded you on the stage.
16—**Vital Food Facts**—scientific information told in a simple way. What to eat to create new power and vitality.
17—**Special Ways to Get Bulging Biceps**—clear instruction for using this apparatus to rebuild that specific part.
18—**Secrets of Chest Expansion.**
19—**The Stomach Muscles and How to Strengthen Them**—special advice on this important zone of the body.
20—**Ways to Put New Power Into Your Legs** and Thighs—many otherwise strong men are weak here.
21—**Hints on Increasing the Strength of Your Back** for greater lifting ability.
22—**PRIVATE Letter To Men**—pointing dangers and safeguards you should know, for your own protection.
23—**Complete 150-Page Sex Book**—simply and clearly written (and illustrated) by great doctor. Straight answers to questions that have puzzled you.

For Only $3.95

150-PAGE SEX BOOK GIVEN FREE OF EXTRA CHARGE For Prompt Action

SEND NO MONEY

Mail Coupon NOW!

You don't have to send a penny with this coupon. When this big package is delivered—in its Plain Container—merely deposit the special price of $3.95 plus actual delivery charges. (This one low price includes ALL these 23 items—no further payments.)

Then if, after 5 days examination, you are convinced that this complete home gymnasium will not give you the kind of body you have always longed to have, will not improve your health, increase your strength, and make you a better and more confident specimen of physical manhood—if you are not positive that these claims are true, then you have the perfect right to send back all the material you have received and your $3.95 will be refunded in full at once.

Don't be satisfied with anything less than the kind of body you have always wanted! Don't "put off" doing something about it—now when it is so easy to rebuild yourself this new way! Mail coupon—without money—at once. **THE GYM HOME TRAINING CO., Dept. 2312, 115 E. 23rd St., New York, N. Y.**

THE GYM HOME TRAINING CO., Dept. 2312
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

Send me at once—in a plain, unmarked container—complete home gymnasium, including all features listed on this page. When package is delivered I will deposit $3.95, plus actual delivery charges. (Canadian orders $3.95 cash with order.) (Foreign orders $4.95 cash with order.)

If after 5 days examination, I am not delighted with this complete outfit, I may return it and you will at once refund my $3.95 in full.

SPECIAL: If you act at once you will also receive this 150-page sex book ABSOLUTELY FREE!

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

☐ Check here if you are enclosing $3.95 right WITH this coupon. In that case, we will pay the delivery charges and you will make this saving.

PUBLISHED EVERY MONTH

THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. III, No. 3 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* December, 1934

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

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Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk.

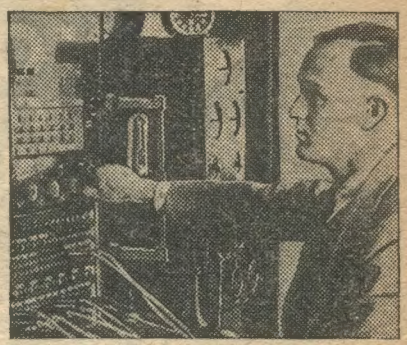
Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Ranch Stories, The Phantom Detective, The Lone Eagle, and Sky Fighters

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME IN SPARE TIME FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB!

J. E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute

FREE BOOK TELLS HOW MAIL COUPON

Act today for better pay. Act today to break away from a low pay, no-future job. Act to get away from having to skimp, scrape to pay your bills. Mail coupon for my free 64-page book. It tells you how I will train you at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert; about my training that has doubled and tripled the pay of many.



SAVE MONEY--LEARN AT HOME

Special Equipment Gives You Practical Experience

Hold your job. No need to leave Home and spend a lot of money to be a Radio Expert. I'll train you quickly and inexpensively right at home in your spare time. You don't need a high school or college education. Many of my successful graduates didn't finish grade school. My practical 50-50 method of training—half with lessons, half with Radio equipment—gives you broad practical experience—makes learning at home easy, fascinating, practical and rapid. There is opportunity for you in Radio. Old jobs are becoming more complicated—many need better trained men. New developments are making new jobs. Short waves, loud speaker systems, police Radio, auto Radio, aviation Radio, television—Radio's newest uses are covered by my training. Here's a field that's growing. It is where you find growth that you find opportunity.

Many Radio Experts make $40, $60, $75 a Week

Consider these facts—think of the good jobs they stand for. Over 16,000,000 Radio sets in use, over 600 broadcasting stations, over 40 large manufacturers of Radio sets, over 3,000 manufacturers of parts, over 100 Police Departments Radio equipped, airplanes and airports Radio equipped. Thousands of ships touching every seaport of the world, Radio equipped. Over 35,000 stores selling sets and parts, about 2,000,000 autos Radio equipped and about 20,000,000 unequipped. Loud speaker systems wherever people gather, indoors and outdoors. Commercial Radio stations dotting our coast lines. Radio a big industry—is growing bigger fast. A few hundred $40, $60, $75 a week jobs, have grown to thousands.

Get ready now for Jobs like these

A spare time or full time service shop; installing, maintaining, operating—broadcast, aviation, commercial, ship, television and police stations. A Radio retail business of your own. Installing, maintaining, servicing, loud speaker systems. A service or sales job with a store or jobber. I'll train you for good jobs in every branch of Radio.

Many make $5, $10, $15 a week extra in Spare Time almost at once

Every neighborhood can use a good part time serviceman. I'll start giving you special instruction material, plans, ideas, the day you enroll, for making money in spare time. Get my book—read how many of my students make $200 to $1,000 in their spare time while learning.

Your money back if not satisfied

I'll make this agreement with you. If you are not entirely satisfied with my lesson and instruction service when you finish, I'll refund your tuition.

Find out what Radio Offers

Mail the coupon. My book of information on Radio's spare time and full time opportunities is free to any ambitious fellow over 15. Read what Radio offers you. Read about the training I offer you. Read letters from graduates—what they are doing and making. There's no obligation. Mail coupon in an envelope or paste it on a postal card—NOW.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 4N09
Washington, D. C.

HERE'S PROOF

Good Position Station WSMK

"I have a good job, make a nice salary, and all my success is due to N.R.I. I am operator of Station WSMK. I highly recommend the N.R.I. Course. It enabled me to pass the Government examination for an operator's license." JOHN HAJDUK, Jr., 21 Gerard Ave., Southern Hills, Dayton, Ohio.

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Nets about $50 a Week besides Sales

"I have been getting along fine. I average ten calls a week, which nets me about $50, not counting profits on sales. I have serviced almost every make of set and have earned more than I ever expected. I owe my success to the N.R.I. and its wonderful Course." BERNARD COSTA, 150 Franklin St., Brooklyn, New York.

I have doubled and tripled the salaries of many

MAIL THIS NOW!

J. E. Smith, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 4N09
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send free book about spare time and full time Radio opportunity, and how I can train for them at home in spare time. (Please Print Plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

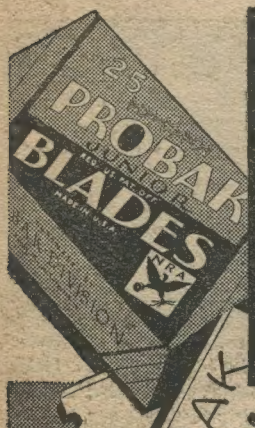
Address .....

City..... State.....

The Tested Way to BETTER PAY

DOWN

GOES THE PRICE OF SHAVING COMFORT



NOW PROBAK JUNIOR 25 blades for 59¢

SHAVING comfort hit an all-time low in price with the announcement of Probak Junior—the remarkable new double-edge razor blade. Think of it! You get 25 keen, smooth-shaving blades, uniform in quality, for only 59¢. You'll wonder how such fine blades can be sold for so little money. Probak Junior is the product of unequalled manufacturing methods and matchless skill. This blade is automatically tempered, ground, honed and stropped—gives you wonderful shaving satisfaction. Try Probak Junior and see for yourself. Get them today from your nearest dealer.

Probak Junior fits all Gillette and Probak razors

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 8x10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed. **47c**

SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful life-like enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47c plus postage—or send 49c with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent C. O. D. 78c plus postage or send 80c and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted.

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BICYCLE GIVEN! WITHOUT COST!

OH, BOY! Here's an opportunity to win a bicycle, movie machine, and your choice of 300 other big prizes—without a cent of cost. Bicycle is latest 1934 model, fully equipped. Speedy as a rocket. Movie machine comes to you complete with thrilling film. Run your own movie; make money. It's easy to win these prizes. Just deliver 8 fine magazines in your neighborhood. You'll make CASH profits and gain valuable training. Boys 12 years and older, write today, and we'll start you!

JIM THAYER, Dept. 434

THE CROWELL PUBLISHING CO., SPRINGFIELD, OHIO

FROM OUR SANCTUM

¶ The December issues of our companion magazines contain the best novels, stories and features to be found anywhere.

¶ A fiction tour of the world for 15c in the December THRILLING ADVENTURES! First, a smashing book-length novel by Johnston McCulley—THE LAGOON OF MONSTERS, that takes you to Singapore. Then, THE LOST TREASURES OF EDEN, a pulse-stirring true-experience story by Captain John Powers. Also THE POISONED CHALICE, a complete novelette by Major George Fielding Eliot and many other yarns of adventure in distant climes.

¶ RIDERS OF THE CRIMSON TRAIL, by WILTON WEST, is the complete book-length novel featured in the December THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 15c at all stands. Cliff Farrell, Jackson Cole and Stephen Payne contribute hell-for-leather stories.

¶ DEATH RIDES THE SKIES, a complete book-length novel by OWEN ATKINSON—FOOLS FOR LUCK, a novelette by GEORGE BRUCE—and zooming, rip-roaring stories and features in SKY FIGHTERS. 10c.

¶ SILENT MURDER, by GEORGE A. McDONALD, is the featured mystery novel in THRILLING DETECTIVE for December. Gripping crime stories by Norman A. Daniels, George Bruce and others. 10c.

¶ The latest exploits of Richard Curtis Van Loan, world's greatest sleuth in THE CRIME CASTLE—a full book-length novel in THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE. Other crime stories. 10c.

¶ The latest exploits of John Masters, world's greatest ace, in WINGS OF DESTINY—a full book-length novel by Lt. Scott Morgan in THE LONE EAGLE. Other zooming stories. 10c.

¶ Bring home a copy of THRILLING LOVE—10c—to sis and mom. They'll find it delightful.

—THE PUBLISHER.

The Story of 2 MEN who NEEDED CASH

THIS MAN DOUBTED:

He said: "Yes, I am broke. I am really terribly hard up. I haven't a cent of extra money for anything. I wish I knew where to get some. I haven't a bit of faith in anything. I am a failure and my luck is terrible."

DO you need money to pay the rent — to meet nagging bills—or to clothe and feed the family? Are you hard up for ready cash and obliged to deny yourself many comforts or even necessities? Are you working for such small wages that you can't make ends meet? Then you will be interested in the experience of these two men.

THIS MAN ACTED:

He said: "Yes, I need money. I am tired of penny pinching. Your generous offer sounds good to me. It costs nothing to investigate—I have everything to gain. I am going to send in my name and find out just what you have to offer me."

I'll Start You in a GROCERY ROUTE BUSINESS

I'll start you in business for yourself and back you up to the limit with my proven plans. I manufacture nearly 300 nationally known products, such as Coffee, Tea, Spices, Extracts, Baking Powder, etc. —just the things people must buy daily to live. You simply take care of a regular route, calling on your customers once a week and keeping them supplied with the products they need. You handle the money and keep a big share of every dollar you take in for yourself. Every step is simple and easy to follow. I furnish you with wonderful premiums and startling special offers for your customers. Is it any wonder people are flocking to my plans for relief from money worries?

HAVE A BIG PERMANENT WEEKLY INCOME

If you are tired of slaving for small pay, here's your chance to break away. You can even start in your spare time—see the business grow — have cash in your pocket—be independent. Enjoy the thrill of being a successful business man or woman. Have a big, profitable, steady year 'round business of your own, paying you up to $60.00 a week. Spare time workers make as high as $5.00 a day or up to $1.25 an hour extra cash. You don't risk a thing. Start locally — branch out as your business grows. I won't limit you on that.

LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

I get glowing letters from route owners daily. One from Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., read: "Made $103.32 in a single week." And one from Albert Becker, Mich.: "Made $100.00 in a week and $40.00 in a single day." Mrs. Jewel Hackett, Ohio, sent me her name. She made $33.00 in seven hours. I have many more letters of exceptional earnings like these. Better send me your name and get the amazing details of my offer.

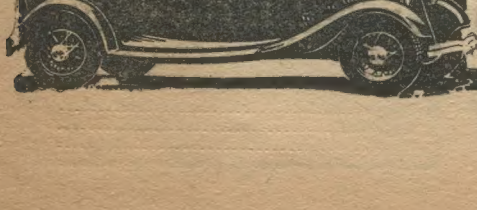
Started Penniless—6½ Months Later Was Worth $1200

Only six and a half months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little more than $1200.00. I can hardly believe it myself—such a success in so short a time! But it's the truth. Many a day I made from $15.00 to $20.00 clear profit.

Your happy hustler,
Hans Coordes, Nebr.

Don't Send Money—Send Name

I don't need your money—I need your help. You don't require any experience or training. I furnish everything—including a brand-new Ford Tudor Sedan to producers as an extra bonus over and above regular cash earnings. There is nothing difficult or complicated about my plans. Just give me a chance to explain the facts. It costs you nothing to find out. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. DO IT NOW!



BRAND NEW FORD SEDAN
Given Producers as Extra Bonus

A FEW WEEKS LATER

Now look at these two men. One is a success; the other a failure. One had the courage to try; the other had no faith—he was a doubter—he is still in hard luck. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to listen to reason. He was not afraid to send in his name and get the facts. When he saw my public announcement offering an 8-cylinder Ford Tudor Sedan to producers in addition to their regular cash earnings, he believed in my sincerity. Why don't you, too, investigate?

TEAR OUT—MAIL NOW

ALBERT MILLS, President
5219 Monmouth Ave.
Cincinnati, Ohio

NRA CODE

Rush me free facts. Tell me how I can start earning up to $60.00 a week at once with a permanent Grocery Route business of my own. This will not obligate me.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Kidneys Cause Much Trouble Says Doctor

Successful Prescription Helps Remove Acids — Works in 15 Minutes

Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous English scientist, Doctor of Medicine and Surgeon, says: "You can't feel well if your Kidneys do not function right, because your Kidneys affect your entire body."

Your blood circulates 4 times a minute through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes in your Kidneys which are endangered by drastic, irritating drugs, modern foods and drinks, worry and exposure. Beware of Kidney dysfunction if you suffer from Night Rising, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Acidity, or Loss of Pep.

Dr. W. R. George

Dr. Walter R. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction, delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes. Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today

Make up to $150 Weekly GIVING AWAY FREE RCA LICENSED RADIOS

AND 10 STAR "SPECIALS"

R. C. A. Licensed Home Model and Automobile Radios and our 10 STAR items including Chest of Silver, Man's Wrist Watch, Electric China Coffee Set, Fishing Tackle Outfit, Cocktail Shaker Set, Bridge and Table Chairs, 2 Clocks, Lady's Wrist Watch and Traveling Bag all given away absolutely FREE with our new sensational unique PUNCH SALES CARD PLAN. This is the opportunity of the year—make up to $150 cash each week for yourself. Every home, car owner, store, office, factory, lodge, club or individual wants these marvelous new FREE R. C. A. LICENSED RADIOS or any of the valuable 10 STAR items.

WRITE TODAY FOR OUR 3 NEW STARTING OFFERS

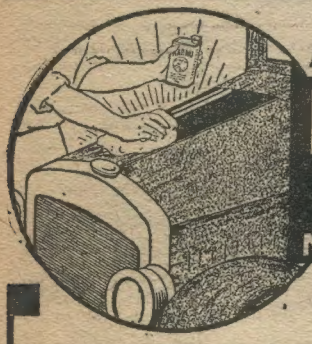
Start at once making money with our unique sales plan. Write for full information how you can secure any or all of these plans.

DELUXE MFG. CO. Dept. 112, 173 W. Madison St. Chicago, Ill.

ONE WOMAN TO ANOTHER

LADIES END PAIN AND DELAY NOW. Don't be nervous or alarmed when nature fails. Get a married woman's dependable secret. I positively guarantee my successful "Special Relief Compound" ACTS QUICKER THAN ORDINARY PILLS OR TABLETS. Compounded of vegetable ingredients used by physicians and nurses more than 25 years because of power to relieve pain and induce flow. Relieves many unnatural delays quickly without pain or inconvenience. Wonderful testimonials from happily married women everywhere. Mrs. W. "I was delayed for nine weeks. Had a natural flow in 3 days." Mrs. C. "I was about six weeks past, in 5 days I was O. K." Mrs. U. "Delayed three weeks. Menses started on 4th day. Simple as A.B.C. to take." Don't experiment or suffer unnecessarily. Send for this proven remedy today. FAST SERVICE. Regular package $2.00. Special Formula No. 2 for obstinate conditions $3.00. Private information from a married woman with order. Literature FREE.

Martha Beasley. Box 22, Northwestern Sta., Dept. 168, Detroit, Mich.



Amazing! Sensational!

REFINISHES AUTOS Like NEW!

No Polishing, Waxing, Rubbing or Painting

KAR-NU Pays You UP TO $7 IN AN HOUR

Just Wipe It On With a Cloth!

Lasts 8 to 12 Months Guaranteed

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Besides refinishing automobiles, KAR-NU has hundreds of other uses in the home, office, factory, store and shop. It refinishes typewriters, adding machines, cash registers, scales, desks, chairs, file cabinets, furniture, book cases, safes, etc,—in fact, anything made of metal or wood on which the original finish has become dull or discolored.

A new miracle discovery! A transparent magic-like fluid with which anyone can refinish any color automobile easily, quickly and economically without polishing, waxing, rubbing or painting. JUST WIPE IT ON WITH A CLOTH! Immediately dullness, discoloration, shabbiness and sun fade DISAPPEAR. INSTANTLY, as if by magic, the old paint is covered with a tough, elastic coat which is absolutely transparent, self-levelling and self-polishing. KAR-NU actually fills the pores and rebuilds the old finish. Paint or Duco is rejuvenated, restoring the lustre, life, glow and beauty of the original factory finish. As KAR-NU dries it seals the pigment and protects the finish from further wear. Lasts 8 to 12 months GUARANTEED.

Sales Galore! Big Profits!

Enormous demand! Millions want it! W. L. Morgan of Mass., made $10.61 in a single hour. Sell to individuals, fleet owners, garages, auto accessory stores, used car dealers, etc. No experience necessary. Send no money for sample and details. Get in on ground floor. Just mail coupon—NOW.

THE KAR-NU COMPANY

Dept. D-26, Oakley Station, Cincinnati, O.

MAIL COUPON TODAY!

Not a Wax, Polish or Paint

KAR-NU is entirely new and different—nothing in the world just like it. Now, no need to spend long, tedious, back-straining, muscle-tiring hours polishing, waxing and rubbing to produce a "mere shine" that is only fairly satisfactory—that lasts for only a short time, and that leaves the car looking worse than before when it wears off. KAR-NU is free from the labor and danger of so-called "cleaners" with acids and abrasives that remove some of the finish each time they are used. KAR-NU produces a result that is equal in beauty to a repaint or refinishing job which costs $25.00 to $75.00.

This Seal of Approval awarded by the Testing Laboratories of the Automobile Club of Illinois shows that KAR-NU is a product of merit and does all we claim for it.

FREE SAMPLE COUPON

KAR-NU CO., Dept. D-26, Oakley Station, Cincinnati, Ohio.

RUSH FREE SAMPLE to prove your claims about KAR-NU and Territory Offer.

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....State....

WHAT *will you be doing* ONE YEAR *from today?*

THREE hundred and sixty-five days from now — what?

Will you still be struggling along in the same old job at the same old salary — worried about the future — never quite able to make both ends meet?

One year from today will you still be putting off your start toward success — thrilled with ambition one moment and then cold the next — delaying, waiting, fiddling away the precious hours that will never come again?

Don't do it, man — don't do it.

There is no greater tragedy in the world than that of a man who stays in the rut all his life, when with just a little effort he could advance.

Make up your mind today that you're going to train yourself to do some one thing well. Choose the work you like best in the list below, mark an X beside it, and without cost or obligation, at least get the full story of what the I. C. S. can do for you.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University"

Box 3968-C, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X:

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

- ☐ Architect
- ☐ Architectural Draftsman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Wood Millworking
- ☐ Concrete Builder
- ☐ Contractor and Builder
- ☐ Structural Draftsman
- ☐ Structural Engineer
- ☐ Electrical Engineer
- ☐ Electric Wiring
- ☐ Electric Lighting
- ☐ Welding, Electric and Gas
- ☐ Telegraph Engineer
- ☐ Telephone Work
- ☐ Mechanical Engineer
- ☐ Mechanical Draftsman
- ☐ Patternmaker
- ☐ Machinist
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Civil Engineer
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Gas Engines
- ☐ Toolmaker
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Aviation Engines
- ☐ Bridge Engineer
- ☐ Automobile Work
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Steam Fitting
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Ventilation
- ☐ Sanitary Engineer
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
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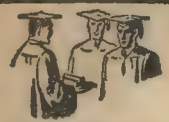

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CHAPTER I

Old Enemies and New

DUSTY FENTON entered the Oasis Saloon in the town of Canyon shortly after noon. As the swinging doors clicked behind him and shut off the glaring sunlight of the outer world, he moved a little to the left of them and paused to let his eyes become accustomed to the semi-darkness.

In that instant he became aware of a sort of furtive hostility that seemed

Dusty Fenton

to permeate the very air of the place. An abrupt hush fell over the siesta hour crowd, and an intangible something ran electric through his suddenly tense body.

Ordinarily, being a stranger far removed from his home range, he would have gone directly to the long bar which occupied the length of the big square room at his left, bought himself a trail drink and asked the question which was the real cause of his entrance. But that veiled and furtive threat held him motionless, picking out the details of the layout, scanning the faces that turned toward him for the remembered face of some enemy.

HE found none. Most of the half-dozen tables that filled the bulk of the low ceilinged room were occupied. A scattering of men lounged along the bar itself. Stairs at the rear led to a balcony; an arched doorway beneath the balcony opened into what obviously was a gaming room.

"Can't be me they're expectin'," Dusty opined silently. Turning, he went to the bar, where a fat, bald-headed man with a button nose and small dull eyes came to take his order for bottled beer.

When the bartender returned with the opened bottle and a glass, Dusty asked his question quietly. The dull eyes of the fat man widened, mottled crimson tinted his flabby jowls, and he turned abruptly without replying to beckon a man from one of the tables where a five handed poker game had been interrupted by Dusty's entrance.

THIS man was tall, rawboned, angular. He packed two guns in tied down holsters and walked with a sort of slinking swagger. The bartender muttered in his ear and he came toward Dusty immediately, his hawk-face bleak, his hard lips twisted in a sort of sneering grimace that might have been intended for a smile.

Pausing at arm's length, he stared down at the cowboy, whose lean and somewhat spidery body appeared undersized in comparison with his superior bulk. His voice was hard, rasping, arbitrary, and he offered nothing at all in the way of introduction.

"Lookin' for the Crooked H, huh? Well, pilgrim, yuh shore showed rare judgment when yuh picked this place to ask questions about that outfit! What's yore business there?"

Fenton's greenish eyes narrowed a trifle, a second quiver of nervous tension ran over him. There was thinly veiled threat in the overbearing manner of the hawk-faced *hombre*.

It was a queer, a puzzling layout. Why had the fat bartender found it necessary to summon the gunman instead of advancing the simple information requested of him? All Dusty wanted was the route and the distance to the Crooked H ranch.

"Personal business, friend," he said quietly. "Soon as I find out which way an' how far to ride, I'll get about it."

Hawk-face laughed. "Shore! But

first off, runt, yuh'll talk right out, free an' easy. *Sabe?"*

Dusty shook his head slowly. All tautness went out of his wiry body and a kind of greenish light glinted between the narrowed lids of his eyes.

"No," he drawled. "I ain't shore I do, Big-an'-Ugly!"

The taller man stopped laughing. The bartender moved hastily toward the farther end of the bar. Tension tightened sharply over the spectators and all at once the silence in the saloon was grimly ominous.

"I'll explain real simple," stated Hawk-face.

He moved forward a half step, jabbed a long forefinger at Dusty's chest, just below the knotted ends of the smaller man's faded neck-cloth.

"My name is Menlo—Hoke Menlo. Bein' a scrawny, sawed off, hammered down runt of a pilgrim, mebbe yuh ain't read yore hist'ry books like yuh should, but there's plenty wiser *hombres* will tell yuh when Hoke Menlo asks questions he gets straight answers—a heap *pronto!* I'm askin' just once more—what's yore business at the Crooked H?"

Dusty's eyelids pinched in at the corners. He had indeed heard of Hoke Menlo, knew the man's reputation as a gun-slinger and killer. He brushed aside the probing forefinger, looked at Menlo straight and hard.

"An' I'm tellin' yuh once more, my business is personal."

TURNING toward the bar then, he reached for his half empty glass of beer. As his fingers closed about the glass, Menlo cursed viciously and grabbed his right arm near the shoulder. Dusty's spidery body, muscled with steel and rawhide, reacted with the swiftness of a suddenly released spring.

The beer swished into Menlo's face, the glass followed. A jolting knee caught the gunman in the groin,

Mark Breen

doubled him forward into an upcoming right fist, small but rock hard, that smacked full against his chin.

Then Fenton was across the room, with his back against the solid wall. He was crouching, hands cupped above the handles of his own two guns, before the spectators recovered from their astonishment.

THERE was a concerted forward rush by three hard faced men at the far end of the bar, a scrambling dive for cover on the part of the four men who sat about the table littered with cards and poker chips. Dusty's voice cracked sharply.

"Hold it!"

The small door of a room off the balcony opened quietly, but no one noticed. The three men abruptly halted their forward rush. All eyes were upon the wiry, shabbily clad, dust covered cowboy and Hoke Menlo. The gunman, having landed in a sitting position with a jar that shook the place, clawed back to his feet, mouthing lurid oaths, blood and beer dripping from his distorted face. He dragged his shirt sleeves across his eyes, sighted Dusty, crouched.

"Yuh measly flea-bite, I'll send yuh

Will Harkness

to the devil! Drag iron, or by—"

"Hoke! No gunplay, yuh fool!"

The cold, curt voice cut above the killer's mutter like an edged tool. Dusty, tense and ready, saw Menlo freeze, hands no more than an inch from the handles of his guns. A shivering sigh passed over the room. Menlo shuddered, straightened. Again the cold voice slit through the silence.

"What's the meaning of this?"

DUSTY'S head turned so that his glance included the tall man who stood at the top of the balcony stairs, while at the same time he did not for an instant lose sight of Menlo.

"Meanin' is this sidewinder come near gettin' a free one-way ticket to the devil!" he snapped. "What kinda town is this anyhow, that a peaceable traveler can't buy a drink an' ask directions without gettin' braced by some two-bit gun-slinger?"

"Yuh lousy runt!" Menlo's wrathful snarl rose to almost a scream. "I'll show yuh—"

"Hoke! Haul in, I say! I'll have no shootin' here!"

Again the cool, edged voice stilled the gunman's snarl. Something in the quality of that cold voice impressed Dusty. When Menlo lurched around to face the bar, he eased his own rigid pose somewhat to give fuller heed to the tall man in black broadcloth and immaculate white linen, now descending the stairs.

His first really distinct glimpse of the handsome, firmly chiseled features of this man, caused a shock of astonishment to travel over him. He stared as if at an apparition. Of all men in the world, this was the last one he'd thought to find here in Canyon, halting gunplay between himself and a renowned killer such as Hoke Menlo!

"Breen!" he muttered, wonderingly. "Mark Breen!"

Across the length of the room their eyes met in a level look, grim and unsmiling. Moving on deliberately, Breen advanced halfway across the intervening space. He was unarmed and took pains to make it evident. His firm full lips curved in a slightly ironic smile.

"You seem surprised, Fenton. But don't misjudge appearances. It wasn't you I was thinkin' about when I called a halt on this—ah—argument. I don't want Hoke disabled. There are other things right now considerably more important than even you, my friend!"

DUSTY was not disposed to take too much for granted where Mark Breen was concerned. He relaxed nothing of his alertness, eased but little the tension that lay upon his nerves and muscles.

Three times before, at widely separated points in the cow country, their trails had crossed. The enmity between them was one of those inevitable things, based upon the inherent antagonism of their characters; intuitive, deep seated, deadly. At their last meeting, Breen had vowed that if ever they faced each other again one of them would die.

Yet now, with the odds definitely in his favor, he chose to temporize.

Dusty wondered why. He wondered also about a number of other things, including his brother's place in the jigsaw puzzle.

"You'd shorely play the main chance, Mark," he asserted tartly. "Yore pal with the loose ideas about questions better wear hobbles on his tongue an' temper."

Breen nodded, still with that chill, sarcastic smile.

"Hoke is impetuous. But yuh must admit it's sort of strange for yuh to pick my place to come for information!"

Dusty blinked.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Yore place! Well, that's news!"

Menlo wheeled suddenly, his hawk-face vicious.

"The runt asked the way to the Crooked H, Mark. When I asked his business, he got ornery. I ain't forgettin'—"

"Let it lay," said Breen sharply. "Yo're fast, but don't get the idea there ain't men that's faster. Likewise there'll be no gunplay in the Oasis without the gent that starts it answers to me personal!"

FENTON caught the speculative glint in Breen's flashing black eyes.

"The Crooked H, eh? So!" Mark Breen drawled. "Fenton! Mostly I think of yuh as a flea I'll one day set my foot upon, but yore name is Fenton. So is the name of the new foreman at the Crooked H! That's what brings yuh here, eh? Yuh've come to yore brother's weddin'!"

Suddenly he tipped back his head and went into a paroxysm of silent laughter. Then, entirely sober and decidedly grim, he stared hard at the astonished cowboy.

"That's the way of it, eh?"

Dusty barked at him like an irate terrier. "Do I have to tell every skunk in this rotten town that my business at the Crooked H is personal?"

Hoke Menlo

Mark Breen's tall body stiffened with a jerk. His handsome face went dead white, and a kind of yellow flame seemed to shoot from his dark eyes.

"Why, yuh—"

His harsh voice was drowned in a throaty bellow from Hoke Menlo. The gunman swayed forward, shoulders hunched, head thrust out. With the speed of light his right hand dipped and rose.

The deafening roar of a gunshot blasted through the room, belched out and shattered the siesta quiet of the town with its rolling echoes. Menlo spun half around, bellowed again with pain as he grabbed for his wrist with his left hand. His gun smacked into the side of the bar, jolted to the floor.

"Freeze, yuh sidewinders!" snapped Dusty Fenton.

Smoke dribbled from the black muzzle of the gun which swung sharply upon Mark Breen. Like magic a second gun appeared in his left hand and circled to check any potential hostility elsewhere. Three

slow seconds ticked past. Bootheels thumped along the plank sidewalk outside the swinging doors of the saloon.

"Hoke, yuh dumb fool, I told yuh to keep yore iron covered!" Mark Breen said sharply. "Fenton, I'm tellin' yuh—"

The double doors flung inward violently. A heavy set, grey haired man with a gun in his hand and a badge pinned to his unbuttoned vest, burst through them.

"Drop them guns, young feller! What in tarnation goes on here, Breen?"

CHAPTER II

Rustlers

DUSTY dropped his guns into their holsters. Standing with his back against the solid wall, he continued to watch Breen and the other occupants of the saloon with unbroken alertness. Unfamiliar with Canyon's politics, he didn't know what the officer might do under the circumstances.

"I'll tell yuh what's goin' on here," he stated, before Breen could say a word. "Me, I'm askin' directions to the Crooked H when right away that ugly-mug yonder gets tough an' a heap too curious. I might of plugged him permanent, but I only cut him loose of his gun. Reckon a man has a right to defend hisself, Sheriff!"

To his surprise Mark Breen promply supported his statement. "That's correct, Forbes. No damage done. I reckon Hoke's been drinkin'. Fenton simply defended himself."

The grey haired sheriff blinked, holstered his own gun, rubbed his chin and glanced from Breen to Menlo, then turned a pair of penetrating grey eyes upon Dusty. After a moment, Forbes nodded.

"You'd be Cliff Fenton's brother, I judge. Well, son, I reckon yuh better drift. Follow the stage road west to the first fork, then south. It's about fourteen miles."

He moved in from the doors as he spoke, a solid bulk of a man, rugged and substantial, with something granite-like about him. Dusty shot a swift glance at Mark Breen, returned Hoke Menlo's scowl with a grin, stepped behind the big sheriff and so out onto the sun-baked plank sidewalk.

Beneath the wooden awning of a store two doors west he paused to build a smoke. His greenish eyes were moody with thought as they glanced along the almost deserted street, where whirling sand devils marched in endless and meaningless processions, and the desert wind blew gustily.

"Shore is a queer layout," he muttered.

Cupping the flame of a match, he exhaled twin plumes of smoke, his alert mind clicking swiftly. Breen was a dangerous man; keen, clever, ruthless and utterly lacking in scruples. A born crook, but a master crook.

"HIS trail along the Border had more kinks in it than the squirmin' progress of a sidewinder. He hates me. Why didn't he have me gunned when I was in his joint? Somethin' big is roastin' on the fire. Has he got his hand out for the Crooked H? What's his standin' here in Canyon?"

A veritable flood of questions surged through Fenton's mind. But the situation boiled down to a fairly simple proposition.

If his coming here would mean danger to his brother, the thing to do was to turn back and not ride to the Crooked H, where Cliff had recently become foreman and was scheduled within a week to marry the daughter of the owner. But on the other

Again Dusty fired, and the man went out of the saddle as if jerked by a taut rope

hand, if Breen was conspiring against the Crooked H and Cliff, Dusty's guns might come in handy.

"What I've got to do *pronto* is have a straight talk with ol' Cliff," he decided.

Stepping down into the dust of the street, he tightened the cinch on his blue roan horse, mounted and rode west out of town.

From time to time as he rode he pulled up on high ground to scan the back trail, but failed to discover any sign of pursuit. He hardly expected it, but the habit of alertness was fixed upon him.

This was a rough country—foothills, arroyos, black walled canyons, interspersed at frequent intervals with small, pleasant parks where lush grass grew and stock grazed contentedly. There was enough water, and occasional clumps of junipers and oaks gave shade. As a cowman, Dusty found much that was attractive. He understood how his brother would have been drawn and held here, quite apart from the fact that Cliff had fallen in love with Mary Harkness.

It was late in the afternoon when, following the trail along a dry watercourse at the bottom of a deep, sheer gorge, he rode around an elbow bend

and saw, some twenty yards ahead of him, a group of riders.

Beyond the riders was a small herd of steers.

Something about the scene jarred him, started the familiar trouble-alarm to jangling in his brain. He reined in abruptly, eyes narrowed, lips tight. Two more horsemen were beyond the steers. The five who were nearer him were grouped peculiarly —four closely bunched around one, who was mounted on a small pinto pony.

Dusty was sighted instantly, and one of the five pulled away from the others, and came jogging toward him.

This was a big man, wide and of powerful build, mounted on a huge grey horse. Dusty dropped knotted reins across his saddle horn, sat at ease, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt, greenish eyes slitted and watchful. The big rider came on, right hand held low, arm stiff. His face was a square and red and stubbled with red beard, and the eyes beneath the tilted hat brim were frosty.

"Who are yuh?" he demanded roughly. "Yuh better pull around an' head outa here. This here is a private trail. Yo're trespassin'."

"NOW ain't that somethin'!" drawled Dusty. His lips curled in a tight grin. "I'm obliged for the information, *amigo*. But just who are yuh, while we're discussin' things in gen'ral?"

"None of yore business!" snarled the red faced man. "I'm tellin' yuh to git—or else—"

His awkwardly held right arm crooked at the elbow. But even as the long barrel of a bared gun rose above the neck of his horse his jaw dropped and the leveling action halted abruptly as he found himself staring into the black round muzzle of the weapon which seemed to have materialized out of thin air and leaped into the spidery cowboy's steady hand.

"Or else?" queried Dusty softly.

The red faced *hombre's* sagging jaw closed slowly. Behind him there was a sudden shrill cry, as the rider of the pinto pony broke momentarily away from the three men who bunched about him.

"Help, cowboy! These skunks are—"

STARTLED, Dusty's glance shifted; in that split second Red-face made his play. The roar of the two shots sounded almost as one. The brim of Dusty's hat jerked as he ducked forward over the shoulder of his horse. The bullet from his gun smashed into the other man's shoulder, almost hurled him from the saddle. And even as the echoes caught the blasting sound, the huge grey leaped into a run and went streaking up the gorge, hell bent!

The herd of steers broke away from the roar of the gunshots, stampeded madly up the gorge, the rush and rumble of their hoofs blending with the yells of the two men who were caught in front of them.

Dusty's horse, admirably trained, squatted and turned, churning dust into a choking cloud. His guns swung down upon the startled survivors of the gang.

"Up!" he barked. "Hoist, yuh hellions!"

Three pairs of hands started skyward. There was another shrill yell from the boy on the pinto, a clatter of shod hoofs from the west bank of the gorge toward which the lad had ridden. Three more horsemen came sliding recklessly down a steep trail there. Dusty wheeled his horse alertly, guns ready. A yell of astonishment and delight caused him to lower them.

"Dusty! Dusty, yuh bat-eared runt! By heaven, I'm glad to see yuh! Up to yore ol' tricks, too, huh?"

"Cliff, yuh ol' maverick!"

Dusty's guns dropped into leather. His hand gripped that of his brother, they thumped each other on the back, grinned into each other's eyes. Alike they were in face and feature, but Cliff was a little older and several sizes larger. They had not seen each other for more than three years, and for a moment neither of them had thought for anything else.

"What's been goin' on?" asked Cliff presently. Turning in the saddle, he scowled at the brown faced youngster on the pinto pony, who was grinning from ear to ear and holding a small pistol on the three men from whom Dusty had released him. "Billy, what deviltry was yuh up to? Yuh've been told plenty to keep away from this part of the range."

"I was trailin' rustlers, I was, an' I caught up with 'em, too," retorted the youngster. "Cliff, we've got proof at last. I found Red Collins an' some of them Circle B riders drivin' off a bunch of our steers. Only they spotted me, an' if Dusty—uh—yore brother hadn't come along—"

Then, before anything more could be said, Red Collins himself, holding hard to his smashed shoulder and looking rather grey, came riding up.

"THAT brat's got it all wrong, Fenton," he grumbled. "We found some of yore stuff strayin' on our range, an' was hazin' it back, that's all. Figgered to scare the kid some, so's he'd keep where he belongs after this. An' then this runt here comes along an' started to throwin' lead, an'—"

"Yeah," Dusty broke in waspishly. "It's a very pore tale, Snake-eye. It won't wash. Are yuh hangin' yore own rustlers in this country, Cliff?"

Cliff Fenton frowned and shook his head.

"Drag it, Collins," he growled. "Take yore rats with yuh. If yuh find any more stray Crooked H stuff, just send word to me, that's all. Get out!"

"Sufferin' sage hens!" snorted Dusty erascibly. "D'yuh mean to turn 'em loose?"

Cliff looked at him. At such moments the contrast between the brothers was really remarkable. The older one was the steadier perhaps, but undoubtedly he was the softer, too. There was a kind of brittle hardness about Dusty, a steel-like quality, which Cliff lacked.

"That's what I mean," said Cliff quietly. "We know 'em—an' where to find 'em. Travel, Collins!"

Silently Dusty and young Billy and the Crooked H riders watched while Red Collins and his three companions rode down the gorge and disappeared around the elbow bend.

"There's a good deal about this layout which yuh don't understand, ol' boy," Cliff apologized. "I'm obeyin' orders, yuh see. But come on. We'll talk while we ride. It ain't over two miles to the ranch. Shorty, yuh an' Dave take a ride an' see if yuh can locate them steers. Likewise," he added grimly, "keep outa trouble."

CHAPTER III

Dusty Gets the Lowdown

THE trail which had brought Cliff Fenton and his cowboys into the gorge took the brothers and young Billy Harkness out of it. This was, Cliff explained, a short-cut to the Crooked H. It was a steep and hazardous trail, so narrow that they had to travel single file. As they neared the top they rode for a space along a narrow ledge, their right legs scraping the rock wall of a bluff, while their left feet dangled over a sheer drop of nearly two hundred feet.

"What kinda jackpot have yuh got

yoreself into, Cliff?" Dusty queried, when at last they reached the level of the mesa and drew rein to breathe the horses. "Me, I'm plumb curious. First thing happens when I ride into Canyon, I stumble into a nest of sidewinders, an' turn up a reptile that's shore needed killin' for a right smart time. Name of Breen."

Eyeing Cliff sharply as he spoke, he marked the expression that flickered across his brother's sober face, heard the startled exclamation of young Billy.

"Sounds like you've met Breen before," said Cliff. "Sounds likewise as if you'd dropped into the Oasis."

"Right twice in a row, which is a record for you," grunted Dusty waspishly. "What's Breen up to?"

Cliff looked at him strangely. "Mark Breen, ol' son, owns the Circle B ranch. Red Collins is his foreman. He's our nearest neighbor."

"He's a dirty crook!" declared young Billy hotly. "That Circle B outfit of his is nothin' but a bunch of rustlers an' outlaws! They've been—"

"Billy," Cliff drawled chidingly, "yuh run off too free at the mouth. Likewise, yuh do things which is against orders an' good sense. Once yore daddy hears about this latest stunt of yores, he'll peel yore hide with a latigo, I reckon."

BILLY gulped. He was about fourteen, Dusty judged, brown as an Indian, with a thin, eager face and a superabundance of energy.

At Cliff's assertion he whitened a bit but kept his chin up and answered steadily.

"All right. I trailed them steers, an' I got the dope yuh've been wantin', Cliff. If I'm to get licked for doing' it, I reckon I can jest about take it."

Cliff winked at Dusty. "Might do yuh good at that, kid, but mebbe we better keep yore part in this ruckus between us. To make our tale hold together, yuh swing a circle an' ride in from the east. *Sabe?*"

The boy gulped again. "Shore," he muttered. "Yo're okay, Cliff. Be seein' yuh, Dusty," as he went off at a fast lope.

They rode forward at the jogging trot of the rangeland, streamers of dust rising behind them. The clustered buildings of the ranch came into view presently, on high ground some two miles ahead. It was an attractive vista, upon which Dusty looked with unmixed approval, even as he listened to his brother's tale of Mark Breen's rise to power in Canyon County.

"BREEN showed up here close onto two years ago," Cliff stated. "Allowed he had money an' figgered to make investments. First thing he did was to buy the Circle B off'n ol' Sam Baldwin, who left the country *pronto* an' ain't been seen or heard from since. After that Breen starts in collectin' more acreage an' sundry business enterprises an' such in Canyon. The same includes the Oasis an' a chunk of bank stock, which he wins off'n Ben Chapin in a game of draw poker.

"The amount of cash money he's parted with — exclusive of what he paid for the Circle B—is remarkably small, if yuh start in totalin' it up an' checkin' the sum against his winnin's at draw an' stud, an' the proceeds from the games at the Oasis. That joint is shore a gold mine, the way he runs it."

"Would be," Dusty growled. "But what's the trouble yuh've been havin' with him?"

For half a minute the only sound was the *clip-clop* of the horses' hoofs along the beaten surface of the trail.

Cliff's face hardened, but when he spoke it was quietly.

"Begun with an argument over water rights. Yuh see, the old man

was one of the first to bring cows onto this range, an' he made shore of his water supply by gettin' control of Amarillo Creek, which runs into the upper end of the gorge yonder. He built a dam, which is why there's no water down below at this time of the year."

There had long been an agreement between Harkness and Sam Baldwin concerning use of the stored water, Cliff explained, and Breen's first move was a demand for a larger share for his Circle B. Next, he'd offered to buy out the Crooked H for a fraction of its worth.

"The old man is kinda slow an' cool, but he's right gifted in the use of language when he gets started. Reckon he done hisself proud. Leastwise, there was consider'ble smoke, an' Breen withdrawed his proposition. Since then we've been kept busy."

The situation shaped up in general pretty much as Dusty had expected. There had been rustling, stock killing, grass fires, other troubles common to range warfare, even to shots fired from ambush on the range and the killing of a Crooked H cowboy in town one pay night.

"Through it all," Cliff concluded grimly, "Breen has acted plumb innocent. He's made hisself strong with the county supervisors, an' popular with the nesters an' such. Right now I bet he's the real political boss in this county."

"DOES he run the sheriff?" queried Dusty.

"I dunno," Cliff answered. "Forbes has always struck me as bein' a good man, plumb stubborn about doin' a real bang-up job of sheriffin'. The old man trusts him. His orders is to fight legal, which is why I let Red Collins an' his rats get away. But Forbes has been doin' mighty little, it seems like. Only a coupla days ago he told me there was no proof Breen was messed up with this rustlin' an' hell-raisin'."

"Sheriffs are a heap similar in their habits," Dusty remarked tartly, his eyes on a horseman who appeared sudden over toward the rim of the bluff. "Mebbe he'll argue about the proof yuh've got for him now. Who's that yonder? One of yore boys?"

Cliff followed his gesture and nodded. "Yeah. Buck Lanning. Wonder what— Huh! Reckon he heard the shootin' an' rode over for a look-see. We'll wait for him."

THEY pulled up, Lanning spurred toward them at a lope. When he came nearer, Dusty saw that he was a man of Cliff's age, tall and rather bony, with a lantern-jawed face and dark, lusterless eyes.

"Had trouble, Cliff?" he demanded, drawing rein.

"Nothin' serious," Cliff drawled. "Sort of a celebration, yuh might call it. Shake hands with my brother. Dusty, Buck's our *segundo*. He's been a long time at the Crooked H."

Lanning gave Dusty a hard, straight look and a quick, unenthusiastic grip of the hand, and Cliff made a terse explanation of what had happened.

"Sorry I missed it," said Lanning. "Heard the shots, but the echoes throwed me off." Glancing at Dusty, he added peculiarly: "Collins is supposed to be right fast with a gun."

The spidery cowboy merely shrugged and they rode on their way toward the ranch.

As they neared the ranch buildings Dusty's interest focussed upon the layout, which was remarkably complete and indicative of careful planning. In addition to the main building, which was a huge U-shaped adobe built around a central patio, there were two long bunkhouses, a separate foreman's cottage, various barns, sheds and lesser buildings, and a veritable maze of corrals out back;

a windmill turned slowly on the failing breeze.

When they rode up young Billy was unsaddling his pinto, and a sweet faced girl, with soft brown hair and clear blue eyes, came from the ranchhouse. This was Mary Harkness. She greeted Dusty warmly, paid no heed to his awkward embarrassment, and when she looked at Cliff it was apparent that all she thought of was the man she was to marry.

PRESENTLY Will Harkness appeared—a lean, tall Texan, with cool grey eyes that seemed always to be scanning some far horizon. He also welcomed Dusty cordially, and invited the brothers to have dinner in the ranchhouse.

In the next two hours Dusty forgot that there were such things as rustlers and outlaws and Mark Breens. It had been a long time since he'd eaten a meal like the one that was set before him in the cozy dining room. A far longer one since he'd breathed the atmosphere of a real home.

Awkward at first in the presence of Mary and her mother, he soon was at his ease. Nor was it strange perhaps that he should have found himself more than a little envious of his brother. His own hard life gave no promise of anything like this in the future.

In the course of the evening, Cliff managed to convey a signal to Will Harkness, so that when at last the brothers returned to Cliff's neat three-room cottage, the older man followed them there.

"What's on yore mind, son?" he asked directly, and listened without comment to Cliff's terse relation of Dusty's encounter with Red Collins.

"Them steers was never found on Circle B range," Cliff concluded. "Though I'm blamed if I can figger out why Collins would take such a chance in broad daylight."

"He might have been tellin' the truth," said Harkness soberly. "The steers could have been driven over by somebody else. I'll have a talk with Breen tomorrow."

"Yuh'll shorely waste yore time an' breath," asserted Dusty, with a return of his normal tartness. "That skunk don't know the meanin' of the truth, an'—"

He broke off abruptly as he caught a sound outside. Swiftly he went to the door and jerked it open. The sound was louder then. It came to them distinctly—the tattoo of shod roofs on the trail from Canyon.

"Visitors," grunted Dusty.

As he spoke he moved back a little from the open door and his hands dropped to the grips of his two guns.

CHAPTER IV

"Yo're Under Arrest!"

WITHIN three minutes the entire Crooked H outfit had turned out. The ranchhouse was brightly lighted, but the other buildings were dark. Dusty and Cliff stood near the corner of the big house, straining their eyes to penetrate the purple darkness.

When the riders halted, some twenty yards away, they made a blurred mass darker than the night. There were, Dusty judged, about a half a dozen of them. One came forward alone, horse at a walk.

"Helloo-o-o, the house! Yuh there, Will Harkness?"

The deep voice was vaguely familiar, but it was not until he heard Harkness' answer that Dusty placed it.

"Hyah, Sheriff! Come along an' cool yore saddle. Yo're ridin' late."

The sheriff rode on almost to the doorstep, where he swung down, a solid bulk of a man who seemed to move slowly and stiffly. The two

men were plainly visible in the light that spread thinly about the house. Forbes mounted three steps to the porch.

They shook hands, and Harkness voiced a casual question.

"Trailin' rustlers, John? If yuh need help, I'll lend yuh my whole outfit."

"'Tain't rustlers this time, Will," said Forbes in his deep slow voice. "It's somethin' consider'ble more serious. I'm huntin' a killer. Accordin' to the dope, he's here at the Crooked H."

A tingling sensation swept over the listening Dusty. Sheer intuition, perhaps, yet in that instant he knew that this was some shrewdly calculated move of Mark Breen's. He heard Harkness exclaim, felt the hard grip of his brother's fingers upon his shoulder.

His alert mind clicked swiftly. Without hesitation he moved forward into the oblong of yellow light that spilled out through the open door and spread across the porch to the ground below.

"Evenin', Sheriff," he drawled.

The heavy set officer started, came about with remarkable swiftness. The lamplight glinted off the blue barrel of the six-gun in his hand.

"Elevate!" he boomed. "Yuh saved us some huntin', young feller. Get 'em up, I tell yuh! Yo're under arrest!"

DUSTY stood with his feet well apart, thumbs hooked in his sagging gunbelt, body erect without tautness. He did not lift his hands as ordered, neither did he make any hostile move. Cliff leaped beside him with an angry cry, and at the same time Will Harkness spoke sharply in protest.

"You must be makin' a mistake, John! This is—"

"My brother!" rasped Cliff. "An' yuh can't—"

"Hold it!" Dusty cut in above them, his voice edged and cool. "I've been dealt this hand. Let me play it. Sheriff, yuh said somethin' about huntin' a killer. Who am I supposed to've rubbed out—an' when?"

Forbes moved forward heavily, gun threatening. "Told yuh to elevate!" he rumbled. "Get yore hands up—away from them guns—afore I—"

"Sufferin' sage hens!" Dusty snorted. "If I'd intended to resist arrest, d'yuh reckon I'd walked out here this way?"

THE sheriff halted. "Mebbe so," he mumbled. "Mebbe so. But I'm warnin' yuh—I'll shoot if yuh bat an eye. Yo're charged with killin' one Lemuel Collins, by gunshootin'. Now get them hands up, consarn yuh! Will, yuh step down there an' get his guns?"

"It's a frame-up!" declared Cliff hotly. "By jingo, Dusty, yuh—"

"Might be a frame-up," Dusty agreed calmly, "but I reckon the sheriff is only doin' his duty. Fightin' arrest is bad business. That Lemuel Collins is the red-headed foreman of the Circle B, huh? Shore! I plugged him, right enough, but it's the first time I ever heard of a slug in the arm killin' a man."

Will Harkness came around behind and lifted his guns from their holsters. Cliff stood by, swearing softly. At the open door Dusty glimpsed the white face of Mary Harkness and her mother.

"Yo're usin' good sense, Fenton, in not resistin'," Sheriff Forbes spoke slowly. "As for a slug in the arm killin' Collins, it didn't. He was shot twice. The bullet that killed him took him plum between the eyes. There's witnesses that yuh done the shootin'. Hold out yore hands!"

Dusty held out his hands. The touch of cold steel, the click of the handcuffs, sent a chill shivering over him. But even so, he once again

quieted Cliff's angry remonstrances.

Turning, he added curtly: "I'm ready, Sheriff."

"I'm goin' along," asserted Cliff grimly. "This is a frame-up if there ever was one. We'll get yuh out on bail an'—"

"No bail for murder suspects," growled Forbes. "But yuh can ride with the posse if yuh want tuh do so, Cliff."

"No need of it," said Dusty, with some return of his waspishness. "Long as I'm to be hung legal, there's nothin' to worry about. Yuh better stay right here, Cliff."

He did not want Cliff to ride to Canyon that night. The conviction had deepened upon him that behind this arrest was some deeper scheme, some shrewd plot of Mark Breen's. He knew it would have suited Breen to have him resist arrest, become a hunted man, get himself killed as a fugitive.

It was strongly evident that one of Breen's major purposes was to get him away from the Crooked H under such circumstances that he might not easily or quickly return.

Following out this line of reasoning, Dusty was under no misapprehension as to what might happen to himself in the course of that fourteen mile ride to town, escorted by a posse that might have been hand-picked for a definite purpose. To be sure, there was no evidence, according to Cliff, that the sheriff was under Breen's control; but that would not matter much one way or the other.

DUSTY was inclined to believe, from what he'd seen of Forbes, that the man was on the level. If this were true, the plan might just as well include him as a victim of the posse's guns, or as a victim of an ambush into which the posse, the sheriff and their prisoner might ride. The guns of Breen's killers assuredly would not spare Cliff, should he be along.

Without speaking too openly, he tried to get something of this across to his brother, but there was a stubborn streak in Cliff.

"I'm goin'," he said. "An' that's flat."

"Yo're a swayback he-mule!" rasped Dusty. "There's no sense beggin' trouble, blast yuh." Then, noting the set of his brother's jaw, he added more temperately: "If yuh do come along, yo're to stay in town tonight, an' not start back here alone. An' that's flat! *Sabe?*"

"YEAH," grunted Cliff, and turned to have a word in private with Will Harkness, while a couple of the men went off to saddle two horses.

As soon as the horses were brought around, the sheriff swung up, ordered Dusty to do likewise, and lost no time in getting started. Cliff leaned down to kiss Mary before he turned along at Dusty's left. They rode away, trailed by the four man posse.

It was very dark. The stars were dim and far away, making the range a place of sinister shadows, mysteriously grim and ominous. Tension tightened upon Dusty as the lights of the ranch fell behind, and vanished with their descent into the first of the numerous canyons and arroyos that slashed the terrain.

His perceptive faculties sharpened; his senses keyed to more than normal alertness. He felt trapped and helpless, was swept alternately by grim forebodings and by a sort of smoldering anger that yearned for explosive action.

Perhaps his feeling was shared by his escort, for they rode wrapped in silence that was broken only by the muffled thudding of the horses' hoofs, the subdued creaking of leather. But nothing happened. No shots flamed from ambush; no roar of guns

checked their plodding progress. They made the sharp descent into Amarillo Gorge, left the huge cut behind them, still without mishap.

Dusty's mood began to change. His uneasiness was no less, but his perplexity increased and he wrestled endlessly with the question: What was Mark Breen plotting? Why this move to jail him, if nothing else was meant? Breen must know that the case would go to pieces once it came to trial. If Red Collins was dead, someone else had killed him.

"There's somethin' else behind this," he muttered. "What kinda deviltry's in the wind?"

"What yuh mumblin' about?" queried Cliff, turning his head.

"It was a fool stunt lettin' yuh take this ride," Dusty barked irritably. "Yuh oughta be out at the ranch, ridin' herd—"

"The boys are on the job," said Cliff. "An' the ol' man an' Buck. Besides, there ain't no war goin' on, ol' scorpion."

"This is a law abidin' country," rumbled Forbes.

"Shore!" snapped Dusty, at his waspish best. "An' Mark Breen is a peace lovin' soul with nary an evil impulse. How well do you know that skunk, Sheriff?"

"Well enough," grunted Forbes.

DUSTY snorted, but chewed the cud of his wrath in silence. They rode on, and still nothing happened. It was very queer. Breen didn't make any plays on impulse. Gradually the conviction settled upon Dusty that, no matter how unreasonable it seemed, his bullet must have killed Red Collins. He found no comfort in the thought.

If Breen was a political power in the county, as Cliff had said, even a flimsy case might very well serve his purpose in squaring accounts. All at once it seemed to the little cowboy that he could feel rope tightening about his neck. It wasn't a pleasant sensation.

Presently they were out of the broken country. They topped a low ridge and saw the lights of Canyon below them, flickering like the riding lights of anchored ships against the sea of darkness. It was nearly midnight when they clattered into town.

THEY trotted down the deserted main street, and reined up before a small adobe building. Here Sheriff Forbes dismounted stiffly and gruffly ordered Dusty to do likewise. The posse, evidently composed entirely of townsmen, disbanded promptly and without ceremony.

"Obliged to yuh boys," said Forbes. "Yuh'll get paid for yore ride, too, of co'se. What yuh aim to do, Cliff, now yo're here? Sleep in the jail? I can put yuh in the cell next yore brother."

"No, thanks," Cliff refused promptly. "I'll trail along, I reckon. I won't be seein' yuh before mornin', Dusty."

Cliff dropped his hand on Dusty's shoulder, turned his horse and rode away. Forbes produced a bunch of keys from his pocket, unlocked the door and motioned Dusty ahead of him into the jail.

"I got my gun handy," he warned grumpily. "Stand quiet while I strike a light."

"Yo're a mighty suspicious cuss," Dusty drawled. "Reckon a man's safe in jail, an' safety's shorely what I crave right now. Light yore light."

A match flared, cast its pale glow upon the rugged features of the officer, who peered at the little cowboy for a moment while his other hand fumbled for the chimney of a lamp. Glass tinkled.

Forbes turned.

In that instant something swooped out of the darkness, and the match went out. Dusty dodged instinctively,

stumbled into a charging body that sent him staggering into the wall.

There was the rasp of a curse, a smothered roar from Forbes, the thud and jar of blows, a mighty scuffling. Not a shot was fired; no sound was made that would reach far along the quiet street. Dusty wrenched away from the wall, steadied on his feet as a crunching thud was followed by a groan and the sliding thump of a falling body.

Powerful hands grabbed him. He jerked away, lifted his arms high and swung hard with manacled wrists at a blurred man-shape.

His blow never landed. Something drove into his stomach like the kick of a mule. Then it seemed as if the roof fell in on him. There was a blinding blaze of light, a roaring sound in his ears, and after that black silence.

CHAPTER V

Treachery

MOTION, jarring, pain wracked, sickening motion. The chill breath of the night wind biting into the core of him. The mutter of men's voices. The steady *clip-clop, clip-clop* that beat an agonizing cadence in his throbbing head. These things penetrated the stupor that held Dusty. He seemed to feel and be aware of them at first from a great distance.

Even the stabbing ache of his gun-whipped head seemed to be remote from him. But the pain and the chill and the sweeping waves of nausea combined to fight against the numbness of his brain and body. From a small beginning, consciousness rushed upon him like the flood from a cloudburst roaring down a steep walled canyon.

The motion, he discovered, was that of a horse. Familiar motion that strengthened his grip on reality. The stubborn fighting heart of him began to reassert itself. The tempered steel of his will sprang true. The plodding gait of the horse, the chill bite of the night wind, helped restore memory, brought balance and form into a swirling mad world of pain.

The agony was not all in his head; his whole body was a-throb with it. His muscles were knotted and cramped. Instinctively he willed them into motion. That experiment brought him fully and completely back to consciousness. He could not move his arms or his legs. He was tied to the saddle in which he hunched and swayed like a drunken man!

A groan wrenched past his compressed lips. He raised his throbbing head, squinted pain dulled eyes against the starry darkness. A mounted man rode on either side of him. They stared at him, their faces blurred and indistinct.

"Comin' out of it," muttered the one at his right.

"'Bout time," said the other. "We're 'most far enough now, ain't we? Yuh shore tapped him, Joe!"

Joe grunted and his horse moved over so that his knee drove hard against Dusty's leg. He thrust his face closer. It was a flat, ugly face, with a misshapen nose and an undershot jaw. Dusty had never seen the man before, but he knew the type.

MEN like Joe made up the greater part of every outlaw band that ever roamed the West. He was tough and salty; he would slit a throat or drive a slug into a man's back without qualm or hesitation; his intelligence was so low that he would never question any command given by his acknowledged leader.

"Snap out of it, runt," he snarled. "Yuh ain't dead."

He said it as if he regretted the fact. Dusty's reaction was prompt and characteristic. He raised his head

and glared and spoke between his teeth.

"Yo're li'ble to live to be sorry I ain't! Whatever's the sense of all this? What happened to Forbes? Why—"

"Save yore wind," rasped Joe.

The other man, however, chuckled. "The answers to them questions might surprise yuh, Fenton. Ponderin' 'em will give yuh somethin' to do for a spell. We're yore friends, savvy?"

"A man's friends don't bust his head with no six-gun an' tie him up an' drag him off thisaway," snapped Dusty.

"Yuh'll be surprised," the other man repeated, still chuckling. "But don't hold that headache against me. Thank Joe for it. All I done was poke yuh in the stomach."

"Shut yore head, Mike," snarled Joe. "Yuh talk too much!"

Mike stopped chuckling, ground out an oath. But he fell silent, and they rode on that way, horses jogging now at a faster gait.

Dusty was thinking hard. As his head cleared and his brain began to function with something of its normal clarity, his confusion increased. These men, in spite of Mike's assurance, certainly were not friends of his. Yet they had staged a jail-delivery, had snatched him out of the hands of the law just as he was about to be locked up with a murder charge hanging over him.

IT was reasonable to conclude that this was by order of Mark Breen. Breen wanted to be rid of him, to settle their old score. Breen had framed the murder charge in order to exact vengeance in a way that would bring disgrace as well as death.

"Yuh Breen's men?" he asked abruptly.

Joe's face turned toward him. "Close yore trap!"

On the other side of him Mike chuckled again.

"Don't mind him, Fenton. Somethin' he et soon after he was weaned made him thataway. Breen's men, yuh ask? Huh! I told yuh we was yore friends."

"Then turn me loose," Dusty growled.

"It won't be long now," was the cool assurance.

AGAIN they rode in silence, the puzzle still unsolved. If this was some scheme of Breen's, what was the reason for it?

"What happened to the sheriff?" Dusty broke the silence.

Neither man answered that, or appeared to hear the question. A moment later the two guards drew rein and Dusty's horse stopped. He lifted his head sharply, glanced swiftly about.

The velvet darkness of the night walled them around, unbroken by light or sound or other evidence of habitation. It was a peculiarly impenetrable darkness. Against the brooding quiet of it the breathing of the horses, the squeaking of leather, stood out distinct and loud.

"This'll do," muttered Joe.

"I been thinkin' that for the last half hour," grumbled Mike. "We're miles from anywhere."

Joe turned his horse and Dusty caught the dull glint of the starlight upon the bared gun in the man's right hand. Was this to be the end? Had these men brought him out here to kill him? The little cowboy's scalp prickled and his throat seemed to close up. But he set his jaw and stiffened his spine.

"Cut him loose," Joe ordered gruffly. "An' don't talk so free, yuh idjut."

"Yeah." Mike swung down, walked around the head of his horse. "Some day yo're goin' to talk too free yoreself, *amigo*," he said harshly. "An'

don't get no idea yuh can change my habits."

Joe grunted, but let it ride. The other man drew a long bladed knife from the sheath at his belt and proceeded to cut the rawhide thongs that fastened Dusty's hands to his saddle horn. He also removed the rope that was wound around the little cowboy's body and legs and about the barrel of the horse he rode. Then, with his characteristic chuckle, Mike stood back and put his knife away.

"That's the act of a friend, ain't it? Crawl down an' stretch, Fenton. Yuh must be some cramped."

Dusty hesitated, but curiosity and the bared gun in Joe's ready hand persuaded him. He crawled down stiffly from the saddle and almost collapsed when his weight came upon his numbed feet and legs. Prickling, stinging needles of pain, stabbed his arms, too. He leaned against the horse, gritting his teeth.

"Tough," muttered Mike, in rough sympathy.

But even as he spoke he laid hold of Dusty without warning. Before the spidery puncher could even begin to struggle he was lifted, carried a dozen paces from the horse, dropped without ceremony on the ground.

"Take it easy," Mike drawled, chuckling. "There's a reason for everything, an' we're still yore friends."

"I'll do the tellin'," rasped Joe. "Listen, Fenton."

DUSTY raised his head, stared up at the ugly faced man, who remained mounted but had kneed his horse near.

"I'm listenin'."

"We're leavin' yuh here. Turnin' yuh loose, savvy? The bronc is the critter yuh rid to town. We're leavin' it, too. Likewise yuh'll find a belt an' guns hung across the saddle. The guns—in case yuh get ideas—ain't loaded. Yuh'll have time to see about that after me an' Mike's gone. Don't try to foller us.

"Yore best bet is to keep travelin' south to'ards the Border. There'll be posse huntin' yuh. An' it ain't only that yuh're wanted for gunnin' Collins an' breakin' away from Forbes. The ol' coot got hisself killed in the ruckus. Yuh can figger out where that puts yuh! Come on, Mike!"

COMPLETELY astounded, Dusty huddled there and rubbed his wrists, turned and twisted his feet. He couldn't make head or tail of any of it.

He saw Joe back and turn his horse, holster his gun.

He saw the chuckling Mike mount and swing close for a parting word, and his jaw muscles bunched and hardened and his lips thinned above his set teeth. He squirmed a little, got his prickling, half-numbed feet beneath him.

"*Adios*, Fenton!" drawled Mike. "Yuh've heard some proper advice. Crawl that bronc an' keep headin' south. After goin' to all this trouble on yore account, I'd shore hate to see yuh hung!"

Dusty hunched forward a little, head tilted so that he squinted up at the man, whose face was in the shadow of his peaked hat. Between the spidery cowboy's stinging hands was a small boulder, about the size of a big orange, upon which he'd landed glancingly when Mike dropped him.

In Dusty's mind was a single purpose. A desperate, foolhardy purpose, considering the circumstances and his own condition, but despite his small bulk, he was a fighting man. The rage which had mounted steadily within him since he'd come back to conscious was cold and deadly and powerful. It keyed and spurred him to superhuman effort.

"I've got a strong personal dislike

for hangin', myself," he said evenly. "Fact is—"

Like a small whirlwind he heaved up to his feet. His hands gripped, his arms lifted and hurled. The boulder swished through the air a distance of ten feet, thudded into Mike's middle. A wild, shrill yell burst from Dusty's throat. Mike went backward. His horse reared and whirled, spilled him on his neck.

Wham! The crash of the gunshot ripped through the quiet night. With a rasping oath Joe fired again. But Dusty was moving fast and the outlaw's horse was doing jigsteps.

Mike rolled over, grunting and groaning. Dusty dove for him, came down with his knees driving into the man's chest. Mike's remaining breath went out of him in a gulp.

Joe, cursing like a madman, sent his horse lunging straight at his fallen comrade and the little cowboy who knelt on top of him. A writhing twist carried Dusty aside. He felt the bruising touch of a hoof as he spun, but he kept moving. And in his still partly numbed right hand he gripped the gun dragged from Mike's holster in that split second of time afforded him. The horse went charging past, skidded to a stop, turned. The rider's gun arm swung down. Flame mushroomed in the darkness.

THE breath of the bullet scorched Dusty's neck. He rolled over, came to his knees, thumbed an answering shot. The horse reared, screaming. Joe yelled. Again Dusty fired and the man went out of the saddle as if jerked by a taut rope. The wounded horse wheeled and bolted away, its racing hoof beats fading into silence.

"An' that," muttered Dusty thickly, swaying to his prickling feet, "is somethin' else. If the both of yuh skunks ain't dead, I aim to collect me some interestin' information!"

CHAPTER VI

Stampede!

BY the light of the match which set fire to his cigarette, Dusty saw that it was half past two o'clock. He blew out the flame, and rose to his feet from beside the no longer chuckling Mike. Vigorous rubbing and the flexing of his wiry muscles had driven the numbness from his arms and legs. His head still ached, but all in all he was in fair condition.

"Yuh'll save yoreself trouble by openin' up," he said grimly. "There's a full growed nigger in this here woodpile, an' I aim to smoke him out. Likewise, yo're in a bad way. Yore pal got his gizzard in the way of a slug. Leavin' another corpse out here wouldn't bother me none."

Mike squinted up at him. The outlaw had a bullet head, a round, thick lipped face, and in spite of his former talkativeness there was no doubt that he was fully as hard as Joe had been.

"Yuh can go to the devil," he growled sullenly. "Damned if I know how yuh pulled this trick, but it won't get yuh nowhere. Yo're a considerable distance southwest of Canyon, an' there's plenty posse huntin' yuh by now. Outside o' that I'm sayin' nothin'. If yuh've got any good sense whatever, yuh'll fork yore bronc an' drag it—fast an' steady!"

The end of Dusty's cigarette glowed red. He stood for half a minute staring down at the man. Given time enough, it might be possible to loosen Mike's tongue, but the procedure would not be a nice one and the element of time might be highly important. Dusty knew himself to be in a bad hole, a hunted man. If these men had not lied to him, Sheriff Forbes had been killed at the jail, and the blame for the

killing would assuredly be laid against him.

Moreover, as his brother, Cliff was sure to be smeared out of the same tar barrel. This, far more than his own predicament, worried Dusty. He didn't want Cliff to suffer on his account; he didn't want his brother's future to be marred because of their relationship.

The net result of his "rescue," as far as he could see, was to place him in a worse predicament than he had been before. He knew Mark Breen could be counted on to use this development for his own advantage.

"How come yore boss is workin' independent of Breen?" he asked the scowling Mike. "He oughta know Mark don't like havin' his own plans upset. Likewise—"

"Aw, dry up!" snarled the outlaw. "I'm tellin' yuh nothin'. An' I ain't admittin' nothin'. *Sabe?*"

Dusty dropped his cigarette, set his foot on it.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Rubbin' out Forbes would suit Breen, accordin' to what I've heard. Well—" He shrugged, brushed his hands lightly across the handles of the guns with which he'd armed himself. "I'm ridin'. But there's a long hike ahead of yuh, *amigo*, after yuh wiggle outa that rope yo're trussed up in. Yore hoss done vamoosed."

TURNING abruptly, he went to the waiting horse, drew the reins over its head, swung into the saddle. Mike's voice followed him as he lifted it to a lope with a touch of the spurs.

"Yuh poor fool! The other way's south! Yo're headin' straight for trouble!"

But Dusty rode north. The only thing to do, as he saw it, was to return to Canyon. Whether or not he would give himself up would depend upon what he found out there, after he'd located his brother.

He pressed on, fuming inwardly at the handicap imposed by ignorance of the country. Black night swept past. Grey range rolled beneath the hoofs of his bronc. Hard and steadily he rode, on and on. Time fled.

In another hour or so the sky would begin to lighten. The stars were very dim and distant. When he pulled up on the crest of a rise to breathe his horse the yap of a coyote came down the chill breeze from some other lonely hilltop.

"You an' me both, yuh yeller bellied son!" he muttered. "It's shore a tough world. But we'll play the hand through. Travel, hayburner!"

AGAIN he rode, pounding away, with the dew-damped scent of the range in his nostrils and his eyes scanning the east for some early sign of day. Pungent sage and dusty earth, and the sweep of the quickening wind, and the black night growing blacker as the stars dimmed and vanished in the misty heavens.

The horse snorted, slowed and slid down into a shallow canyon. As it climbed out and paused once more to breathe on the higher level, Dusty's keen ears caught a familiar drumming sound directly ahead.

For a few seconds he sat motionless, listening, straining his eyes against the impenetrable darkness. Whoever those riders were, they were coming directly toward him, horses at a trot.

An inky blur against the grey-black background to his right indicated brush or trees. He turned his horse that way, held it to a walk, his nerves jumping. To run into a posse would be a bad break. He knew without doubt that the men hunting him—whether or not they were adherents of Mark Breen—would shoot to kill at sight.

The iron shoe of his horse clinked against a rock. With a smothered curse he swung from the saddle.

His hand on the animal's nose, he listened again, tensely. Apparently the sound had not been heard. His breath hissed softly between his teeth. Still on foot, he moved forward again toward the blur of brush, trailing the horse by the reins.

At last, crouching in the dense shadowy concealment of the oak thicket, he held the horse short, fingers ready to clamp down on its nostrils. The posse came on steadily. He heard the low mutter of a man's voice, a short laugh. Spur chains jingled. A match flared and the tiny flame illuminated a thin, hard face.

"Put that out, yuh idjut!" growled a husky voice.

The smoker shook out the flame.

"Don't be so fussy," he protested. "That *hombre's* holed up or mighty far on his way to the Border by now. Might as well hunt fer a needle in—"

"Close yore trap!"

"Oh, well—"

Dusty's lips thinned over his teeth; his fingers closed lightly upon the fluttering nostrils of his horse. He made out the shadowy shapes of six or eight men as the posse passed. They tipped down into the canyon and the blackness of it hid them.

DUSTY waited until the sound of their progress died away into brooding quiet. The quavering faraway scream of a mountain lion shivered through the black air as he swung once more into the saddle.

The darkness held on, deepened and thickened beyond belief. It was no longer possible even to see the ears of the horse or the swaying motion of its head. Chill, impenetrable, mist-wet air washed about him. He began to doubt his sense of direction, to believe almost that the dim stars had lied.

For upwards of half an hour he rode, the sound of the horse's hoofs giving proof that the animal followed some sort of trail. The general direction was northerly. When, all at once, the bronc turned to the left, or west, he hauled it sharply back. It balked, refused to take a forward step, snorted and reared when he spurred it.

"Blast yore ornery hide!" growled Dusty. "What in tarnation's got intuh yuh?"

THE horse backed and tossed its head. With a muttered oath Dusty dismounted, held to the reins and went ahead on foot. Two strides brought him up against barbed wire. Beyond the barbed wire he sensed rather than saw the yawning emptiness of a deep gorge. A heavy growth of mesquite bulked darkly at his right, bordering the trail and extending to the rim of the gorge. The trail itself bent to parallel the fence.

"Sufferin' sage hens!" Dusty muttered disgustedly. "What a country for a man to prowl over on a dark night! This here must be the Amarillo Gorge, but how come? Huh! Cliff did say somethin' about it makin' a big bend somewhere south of the ranch. Likewise he allowed there was only two or three crossin's in twenty miles."

He backed away from the fence, swung up. There was no alternative to following the trail in its westerly course.

Fifteen minutes later his keen ears caught a familiar sound off to his left and a little ahead. He drew rein, listened. No other sound in the world was like that—the sound of cattle moving rapidly in mass formation. Somewhere there, a considerable herd was being shoved along, and as he harkened the rumble of hoofs swelled and mounted.

In a flash Dusty saw the picture. He undoubtedly now was on the Crooked H range. Those would be Crooked H cattle, bunched by rustlers—Breen's men—and hazed to-

ward the rim of the gorge. It was another of Breen's dastardly moves to bring ruin to Will Harkness. Morning would find that herd piled up in a bloody mass at the bottom of Amarillo Gorge!

A snarl formed in Dusty's throat; his jaw muscles bunched. His horse jerked its head, sidled nervously.

"Hold it, yuh buzzard!" he growled. "There's somethin'—"

ANOTHER sound almost directly behind him checked his growl, sent his right hand flashing to the grip of his gun. The horse snorted, lunged, reared high against the tight rein, whirled.

"Get 'em up!" rasped a harsh voice. "Yuh rode intuh somethin' this time, yuh rotten meddler!"

"Cripes!" cut in another man. "I bet it's that Fenton *hombre!*"

Blurred shapes separated from the dense shadows alongside the mesquite thicket past which, a few moments before, Dusty had ridden unsuspectingly. Three—four—five mounted men blocked him in! He was trapped between them, the rim of the gorge, and the herd that was being stampeded to oblivion!

As his rearing horse came down he fed steel into its flanks, yelled into its ears. He felt the quivering responsive surge of its muscles. The gun in his hand jumped, roared, spat flame and lead. But quick as he was, it was not enough. His first shot was drowned in the crashing thunder of the rustlers' guns. His horse, not trained for that sort of thing, swerved sharply even as it tore into a run.

Lead screamed about his ears, seared his flesh. He thumbed three more shots, found himself being carried by the fear-maddened horse straight into the path of the running herd!

There was nothing else for it. He yanked the terrified horse still farther around, crouched forward, spurred cruelly in an effort to win past the rushing cattle and escape beyond them. It was a race out of a nightmare. It lasted no longer than two minutes at most, but in each second he lived a lifetime. And each second found him nearer defeat.

The cattle rushed on like an avalanche, hazed by riders who slapped their tails and yipped like Indians. Dusty's frightened horse was forced nearer and nearer the rim of the gorge. Momentarily he expected the rip and tear of barbed wire. Then suddenly the horse went down.

A desperate surge of wiry muscles flung him from the saddle. He landed with a breath-taking jolt almost under the horns of the snorting herd. He rolled over twice.

There was no fence! His legs dropped into empty space. He clawed madly at earth and rock that slipped beneath his clutching hands. Then he was over the edge, dropping like a plummet into the yawning blackness of the gorge!

CHAPTER VII

"Hold That Pose!"

SCRAPING the face of the sheer wall, black air swishing about him, Dusty hurtled toward eternity. With a terrific jarring jolt that drove the breath out of him, he struck something solid. The impact partly stunned him. Limply he lay across a projecting knuckle of rock, began slowly to slide on inch by inch.

Instinct, blind and unreasoning, alone remained. He clutched with his arms, while his legs and half his body dangled in space. His fingers gripped with the frenzy of a drowning man. There he hung, swinging like a human pendulum, while the stampeded cattle swept on to the rim

of the gorge above him, and went diving down into the depths of it.

The impetus of the stampede, the forward shove of the rearmost cattle, saved him from the avalanche of flesh. The wave overshot the direct drop, carried beyond him. Somehow he wrenched up enough to get both arms wrapped around the knuckle of rock, locked his hands together.

Bellowing in terror, huge steers plunged to their death. A heavy body struck him glancingly. The sharp horn of a cow, turning in mid-air, hooked into the back of his shirt, tore through. A kicking leg bruised his shoulder. He went blind and sick from pain. But still he clung there, swaying.

And all at once he realized the avalanche had passed; the herd was gone.

The stubborn will of him responded again to the emergency. His muscles strained almost beyond bearing, his spidery body bruised and battered and aching in every inch of it, nevertheless he found somewhere the added strength required to draw himself up onto the narrow projection which had saved his life.

HUNCHING there, with his back braced against the solid wall of the gorge, he almost sobbed at the relief that came from released muscular strain. He moved his arms slowly, worked the cramps out of his fingers, began carefully to knead his aching muscles. And as he worked so, taking care against any incautious move that might send him slipping off his precarious perch, he strained his ears for sound of the whereabouts of the men who had stampeded the herd.

He had an idea that some search would be made for him, and in this he was correct. The *clip-clop* of walking horses sounded presently along the rim of the gorge.

"I tell yuh he was carried over," growled a harsh voice. "He didn't have a chance, the pore fool!"

"Not any," agreed another. "It was Fenton, right enough, too. His mug showed clear in the flash of his gun. That's one score Hoke Menlo won't have no chance to even."

"Mebbe Hoke won't appreciate his luck. Well, this'll be news for somebody else. Let's go! That shootin' mighta been heard."

THE *clip-clop* of the horses sounded over Dusty's head, quickened into a drumming sound as the riders swung away from the rim of the gorge. The voices of the men became an indistinct mutter, died away into silence. Only then did he attempt to find a way back to the level of the range.

This at first appeared to be quite hopeless. He had dropped at least ten feet, and there seemed to be nothing but smooth rock above him. His movements, too, had to be carefully guarded because of the danger of a single slip carrying him to certain death.

He was still fumbling around when the first sign of dawn became apparent. The sky seemed blacker than ever but the wall of the gorge became dimly visible. This half-light enabled him to discover a horizontal crevice in the wall above his head. By standing on his toes he could barely get a finger hold.

The effort was terrific. In spite of the chill that was in the air, he was drenched in sweat when at last he flattened against the wall, toes in the crevice, and hooked his arms over the edge of the gorge. Squirming into the level ground above, the sprawled face down, his breath sobbing in his lungs, his wiry body shaking and jerking as if from an attack of the ague.

After a long time he sat up, looked grimly about. The sky was beginning to lighten, pale pink spread behind the mountains in the east, the

grey of dawn crept slowly across the range. Dusty's lips writhed into a twisted grin. Dragging his shirt sleeve across his face, he adjusted himself more comfortably, reached for the makings. He swore softly because his fingers trembled when he began to build a cigarette.

"Gettin' soft, yuh blasted idjut!" he muttered. And then, with a deep breath: "I'll tell a man, that was close!"

The cigarette steadied him. He puffed it through slowly, relishing it as he had never in his life relished anything. And while he smoked and rested, he watched with new and deep appreciation the birth of the day. It had been a long time coming.

He'd thought never to see it.

In spite of his self-scorn, there was grim stamina in the little cowboy. His return to normal mental balance was surprisingly swift. He was alive, no matter if he had escaped death by the thin skin of his teeth. And the problem of Mark Breen remained unsolved, with added complications as a result of his misadventure.

PHYSICALLY he was in bad shape. His body cried for rest and food. And he was afoot on unfamiliar range, at an unknown distance from shelter; a hunted man, whom not only his enemies but other men who should have sided with him, would not hesitate to shoot at sight.

"The stew gets thicker right along," he said aloud, grimly. "Every time I win a trick, it's plumb expensive. Huh! Must be closer to the Crooked H than to Canyon, I judge, an' it might not be healthy to hobble into town on foot in broad daylight. Well, debatin' with myself ain't changin' plain facts. I got some walkin' to do."

Reckoning that the ranch must be northwest of him, he headed that way. It was tough, hiking in high heeled boots, with weariness dragging at him like a ton weight. But he set his jaw and concentrated upon putting one foot in front of the other—left, right, left, right, stubbornly on and on.

The rising sun beat down upon his uncovered head; warmth soaked the chill out of the air, gained intensity too swiftly. He tied his torn bandana about his head for such protection as it afforded, trudged on while minutes multiplied endlessly.

IT soon became apparent that the shooting had not been heard. No cowboys from the Crooked H came riding to investigate. The ruggedness of the country made forward progress painfully slow, tremendously difficult. All of life appeared to consist in sliding down into a brush choked canyon and climbing tediously out again; always, it seemed, the same canyon.

Proof that this was not so, however, came unexpectedly when he broke through the brush at the bottom of one of them and splashed into a trickle of running water. This seemed a miracle akin to the finding of an oasis in the desert. He followed the trickle up to the small pool of a spring, where a growth of scrub oaks made a little shade.

Here he drank sparingly, bathed his face and head, drank again. He rested for half an hour. Then, feeling much refreshed, he climbed the steep slope on the west end of the canyon and came to the level ground in plain view of a small band of horsemen. They were riding at a lope, in a northerly direction, no more than fifty yards from where he stood.

At the sight of him they pulled up sharply, wheeled and came pounding toward him. He was about to dive for the shelter of a pile of boulders when one of the riders yelled his name, and his sharpened gaze iden-

tified Buck Lanning, *segundo* of the Crooked H.

Dusty's first reaction was not wholly of relief. He paused, swept by uncertainty. The obvious thing was to accept Lanning's coming as meaning the end of his ordeal of walking, a lift to the ranch where he would be among friends. But from his first glimpse of the man, Dusty had instinctively distrusted him, in spite of the fact that Cliff had vouched for him and said that Lanning had been a long time at the Crooked H.

Now it struck him as at least peculiar that Lanning should be riding toward the ranch, rather than away from it, at that early hour of the morning. Moreover, Dusty had a habit of heeding his hunches; he was inherently suspicious of those against whom intuition warned him.

Still further, Dusty knew himself to be a hunted man, wanted for murder. It might please Buck Lanning very well indeed to hand him over to the law, or to one of the posse that were combing the range for him.

"I've got a feelin' that he hates Cliff for gettin' that foreman job over him. Mebbe he likes Mary, too. But I shore have got to have a horse an' grub, mighty soon. Only place to get 'em is at the Crooked H. Reckon I'd best stand pat."

HE waited, watching narrowly. Lanning and his men rode directly to the edge of the canyon before they drew rein, dust rising, pebbles skittering beneath the churning hoofs of their mounts. They were a grim looking lot, well armed, and there wasn't one of the five, except Lanning himself, that Dusty recognized. However, it was Lanning who swung down and offered a plausible explanation that should have satisfied most of his doubts.

"Jingo, Fenton! Yuh shore look disconnected! How come yo're afoot out here? Where's Cliff? Yuh ain't had no run-in with them rustlers we've been huntin', have yuh? They burned us a haystack in the south pasture last night, an' run off a hoss band!"

His voice and his rather sullen face displayed a proper mingling of wrath and curiosity.

"The skunks I tangled with," Dusty told him grimly, "wasn't messin' around with no broncs. They was stampedin' one of yore beef herds over the rim of the big gorge, an' done their damnedest to have me took along with the critters. I been walkin' on the hoof since daylight, an' I'm shore fed up with it."

AN odd expression flickered across Lanning's face. "Stampede! My gosh, Cliff wasn't caught, was he?"

"Nope." Dusty's voice took on a slight edge. "Cliff wasn't with me, yuh see. He's still in town, far as I know. We was separated there by some well meanin' gents that figgered I was better off dodgin' posse than safe in jail. If yuh feel moral, Lanning, yuh can turn me in for a fugitive."

A tinge of red mounted under Lanning's swarthy skin; his lusterless eyes glinted slightly, but he grinned and spoke quietly.

"Yo're a humorous cuss, ain't yuh? Reckon I ain't as moral as all that, Fenton. Yuh can fork my hoss, if yuh like, an' I'll ride double with one of the boys. There's a line camp yonder about half a mile. We might pick up another bronc there."

"Line camp?" Dusty was surprised. "I figgered I couldn't be far from the ranch."

"About four miles," Lanning said carelessly. "The camp's on the way. We don't use it much 'cept at roundup, but there's gen'rally hosses grazin' close by, an' grub in the cabin."

He turned as he spoke, picked up his dropped reins and handed them

to Dusty, who lifted them over the head of the horse and reached for the saddle horn. As he did so Lanning stepped swiftly behind him and the hard end of a gun rammed against his spine.

"Hold that pose, yuh louse! Them guns are too heavy for yuh to pack around!"

Dusty held motionless, swept by a white hot wave of rage. He had been neatly tricked. It did not need the sudden guffaw of laughter from Lanning's companions to tell him that they were no Crooked H cowboys.

The guns were lifted from Dusty's holsters. Lanning moved back a pace, spoke mockingly.

"Yuh can ease up now, if yuh like. Yore fangs is drawed. My gosh, for a cuss that has a reputation for bein' hard to handle, yo're plumb simple-minded, Fenton!"

Dusty let go of the saddlehorn, turned slowly. There were green flames in his narrowed eyes, but he gave no other sign of the rage that ripped and tore at him. As always when in a tight spot, he became cool, clear headed, quick thinking.

The mask was down now. He saw the renegade *segundo* in his true light: a vicious and dangerous man, motivated by greed and injured pride. If ever in his life Dusty needed all his wits, this was the time.

"SO it's that way," he said quietly "Yeah, I reckon I am simple-minded. I figgered yuh would be loyal to yore friends, when all the time I knowed yuh was a doublecrossin', yeller bellied coyote! Go ahead an' laugh. It's on me!"

Lanning's face darkened, became almost purple. His lusterless eyes were deadly and his hand whitened around the grip of his drawn gun. Dusty watched that hand rather than the dull eyes, knowing that it would betray first by a split second the intention of the man who held it.

"Yuh bet it's on yuh. An' I'm goin' to laugh plenty, yuh lousy son! There ain't nothin' about yuh whatever that don't make me sick to my stomach. By cripes, I don't like the shape of yore nose, or the color of yore hair, or the squint of yore eyes! But I ain't killin' yuh—yet! I aim to square a score with the skunk yuh call yore brother first."

CHAPTER VIII

Jokers Are Wild!

EXCEPT to lift his wiry shoulders, Dusty made no reply. He felt pretty sick himself, knowing that through him Cliff could be made to suffer. It was characteristic of him to feel no fear on his own account. He'd been in bad spots before. If this was to be the windup, he'd take it standing. But Cliff— His lips tightened and a kind of chill touched his spine.

"Vic, toss a loop over this hoptoad. Yuh ain't done all yore walkin' yet, Fenton," snarled Lanning. "Yo're goin' to hoof it plenty!"

One of the other men turned his horse, unfastened the coiled lariat that hung at his saddle horn. Dusty did not move. In turning to face Lanning, he had placed his back against the shoulder of the horse, and he continued to hold the reins in his left hand. From the corner of his eye he saw Vic shake out a small loop.

"Haze yore critter intuh the open, Buck," grinned the outlaw.

Lanning backed away another pace, tilted the end of his gun up a little.

"Stand clear of the bronc," he snapped.

Dusty moved. He leaped to the right like a cat, hauling hard on the single rein to bring the horse around with him. His thumb jabbed the animal in the flank. It came alive with

a snort and a squeal, made a lunging whirl.

Vic's loop shot out, dropped harmlessly. Dusty vaulted into the saddle. The roar of Lanning's gun drowned his yell as Dusty drove home the spurs and sent the terrified horse crashing into the three that stood bunched.

For half a minute the air was full of cuss words, plunging horses, swaying men. Lanning, hopping about like a frog on a hot stove, screamed curses and tried to get a clear shot at Dusty without hitting one of his own men. Vic's horse went into a fit of pitching which kept that gentleman occupied.

Dusty snaked the rifle out of the boot on Lanning's saddle with his right hand, while with his left hand and his spurs he kept his horse whirling and lunging. He wrapped the rifle barrel around the neck of one of the outlaws, smashed the butt into the face of another. The third man came crashing into him, grabbed him in powerful hands that fairly dragged him from the saddle.

"Hold him, Monk!" yelled Lanning. "Break his back!"

Dusty dropped the rifle, felt his breath go out in a grunt as the gorilla-like arms of the outlaw closed about him. His ribs cracked under the strain. He was held, legs dangling in the air, while Monk's horse reared and plunged. The motion of the horse became so violent that the outlaw swayed in the saddle.

A BUCK-JUMP loosened that rib-crushing grip a trifle. But a trifle was enough. Dusty got one arm free. His left hand clawed, clutched, lifted the six-gun from the holster on the outlaw's left hip. Ramming the end of the gun against the man's back, he thumbed the hammer.

With the smothered roar of the shot the powerful arms jerked convulsively, tightened. He was dragged down with the falling man. The horse whirled again, leaped over them, bolted away in a mad run. Dusty rolled over hard, yanked loose of the death-clutch, fired pointblank at Vic.

AT the same instant another gun boomed and a bullet burned along the spidery cowboy's neck. He made a toad-like hop, landed on his toes, flung himself instantly in a headlong dive as Lanning thumbed another shot. The bullet cut through his neckcloth, blistered the skin of his back. His shoulder struck the renegade below the knees.

Lanning hit the ground with a thump, clawed over, broke away. As he heaved up, the barrel of Dusty's gun crashed behind his ear.

That ended it. Monk was dead. Vic, shot through the chest, was unconscious. The other two, recovering from the stunning blows which had knocked them from their saddles, were swiftly and efficiently handled. After that, grim faced, streaked with blood and dust, piratical with his red bandana tied about his head, Dusty looked for the horses.

One of the animals had run only a short distance before its reins had dragged into a mesquite bush and stopped it. But even as he located the animal, some fifty yards west of him, he glanced beyond it and saw three more horsemen sweep over a low rise and come pounding toward him. His lips curled and tightened.

"What next?" he muttered. "Sufferin' sage hens, if Cliff craved to put on a bang-up weddin' celebration, we've done a job!"

Hastily adding a rifle to the collection of six-guns with which he'd re-armed himself, he started at a limping run for the horse. He was in the saddle, ready to run or fight, when another sharp glance at the approaching riders brought a grunt. They rode three abreast, and the one

in the middle was a woman—a young woman—Mary Harkness!

Spurring the horse, Dusty rode to meet them, unaware of his bizarre and bloodthirsty appearance. He saw the three riders pull up sharply, saw the two cowboys ride ahead of the girl, guns in their hands. It came to him then and he slowed his own horse, holding his right hand high. A moment later a cry of recognition came from Mary.

"Dusty! Dusty Fenton! What on earth— Why, what have you been doing?"

She jumped her horse between the cowboys, reined alongside of Dusty, staring at him. He saw then the marks of tears on her face, it's haggardness, the fear that looked out of her wide, blue eyes.

"Cliff's still in town, ma'am," he said hastily, thinking to reassure her. "There was a li'l mixup an'—uh—well, I been ridin' around some, seein'—"

"Dusty!" She reached out and gripped his arm, and he felt the trembling of her tense fingers. "Dusty, have you seen Billy? Is he—hurt? Tell me—do you know where he is?"

Dumfounded, he blinked at her, shook his head. "Why, no, Miss Mary. I ain't seen yore brother. Is he—"

HE bit it off short, almost staggered by the flash of an idea. An idea born of the fact that Buck Lanning had been riding from south to north, instead of from north to south, that morning! Tight-lipped, he waited for her to explain more fully. Something in the grim look of him seemed to steady her, while at the same time every vestige of color drained out of her face, and her voice was dry and husky.

"Billy is missing. He didn't come down for breakfast. We looked for him but couldn't find him. His bed had been slept in, but his clothes were gone, too, and his pinto. He—he hasn't come back. We haven't found any sign of where he could have gone!"

Dusty looked away from her, moved his head, spoke very quietly.

"I reckon yuh've been mighty scared, ma'am. But yuh don't need to be. We'll find Billy. An' he'll be all right—not hurt a bit—when we fetch him home!"

THERE was a certain solemnity about his statement that brought a smothered gasp from the girl. She took her hand quickly from his arm and when he looked at her he saw that both her hands were pressed against her face. But she lowered them after a moment and met his glance squarely.

"You mean—he's been kidnaped?" She said it as if the conclusion was her own. "You mean—Mark Breen—took him away—to hurt us—to force father—"

"I mean we're goin' to go an' get him," Dusty interrupted. He looked beyond her at the two cowboys, whom he recognized as those who had been sent by Cliff the day before on the trail of the steers Red Collins had been driving away when detected by Billy. "Where's the rest of the outfit, Shorty? How many boys can be rounded up *pronto?*"

Shorty shook his head.

"Not so many," he said dubiously. "There's ten of us, but the ol' man took Ed and Chip to town with him after breakfast, an' Buck sent Pete Niles an' the other five up to Eagle Rock. That's about twelve miles north of the ranch, where we've a bull pasture. Buck was worried account of rustlers—"

"Yuh mean Buck Lanning, huh?" Dusty inserted grimly. "With Cliff in town, he was givin' orders. Shore! It was plumb convenient that way."

He scowled at the left ear of his horse, while Mary and the two cow-

boys stared at him curiously. It was the girl who broke the short silence.

"Dusty, that sounds— Oh, you're wrong! Buck Lanning is loyal—he's been with us a long, long time. Whatever orders he gave—"

Dusty looked at her.

"Shore," he said tartly. "An' where is Mister Lanning now, ma'am?"

"He was out early," Shorty said before the girl could speak. "He left a note at the cook shack. Said he was goin' on to the Rock hisself. Yuh bein' Cliff's brother don't give yuh no special privileges, Fenton. An' it looks to me like yuh had some explainin' to do personal, 'stead of passin' remarks about Buck. We heard shootin' down this way, an' yo're ridin' a Circle B hoss. Likewise," he concluded pointedly, "yo're supposed to be in jail. Mebbe yuh feel like talkin', huh?"

As he spoke, the stocky cowboy edged his horse in between Mary's and the one ridden by Dusty. His square, honest face was frankly unfriendly, and his right hand rested on the grip of his gun. The girl, startled, uttered a quick protest that neither man heeded. The other cowboy, taking his cue from Shorty, kneed his bronc around to Dusty's left. Fenton's greenish eyes narrowed, his thin, hard face was bleak.

"ARGUIN'," he said sharply, "won't fetch young Billy back. Likewise, it won't keep certain two-legged skunks from goin' through with what they've started. What shootin' I've done in my life—includin' all that's recent—has been plumb necessary.

"Miss Mary, I'm askin' yuh to give these cowboys their orders. Send one of them to town for Cliff an' yore father. Send the other to Eagle Rock for them boys that Lanning sent up there to be rid of 'em. The message both ways is the same—come a-runnin'!"

"Dusty! What do you—"

Rudely he cut her short.

"Breen has yore brother. He's playin' for big stakes, an' he'll move fast. We've got to beat him by movin' faster. To prove somethin' of what's been goin' around on this range, I'll tell yuh it was Buck Lanning that kidnaped yore brother, ma'am. An' it was Buck Lanning who pulled a whizzer on me a while back an' got hisself a bust on the head with a gunbarrel.

"Yuh'll mebbe find that hard to swallow," he added grimly. "but a look at the remains should be convincin'. Shorty, yo're so blame suspicious, suppose yuh come along an' do the lookin'."

FIVE minutes later the two cowboys were spurring away from the scene of battle, Shorty bound for Canyon, Dave heading along the trail to Eagle Rock. Dusty himself rode beside a sober faced Mary Harkness and led behind him a Circle B horse, across which, belly down, was tied the renegade *segundo* of the Crooked H. Lanning was conscious now, and he didn't enjoy the ride. But his bitter complaints earned him no sympathy.

It was little more than three miles to the ranch. They approached it along the trail which Dusty had ridden with Cliff the day before, forking into it about a half a mile from the cluster of buildings. The ride took the better part of an hour, and scarcely a dozen words were exchanged during that time. The girl, her lips tightly compressed, was deep in her own thoughts. Dusty, almost overpowered by weariness, slumped as he rode and even dozed a little.

Past the ranchhouse they walked their horses, and into the yard at the rear. Smoke lifted from the chimney on the cook shack. Horses moved in one of the corrals. The sun slanted down hotly and the drone

of bees was in the parched air. It was very peaceful.

Dusty slid wearily from the saddle and when he turned Mary was already down. She gave him a pale smile, spoke gently.

"Just leave the horses, Dusty. If yuh'll take care of—of him. I'll see about something for you to eat."

He grinned.

"Java an' a bunk has an enticin' sound," he said. "I'm sort of fagged. It ain't likely—"

A slight sound sent an alarm winging through him. He tensed, heard Mary's startled cry, started to whirl and reach for his guns. A cool voice spoke out of the shadowy interior of the barn.

"Don't try it, Fenton! I've got other plans for yuh! This time, my friend, jokers are wild—I'm holdin' the perfect hand!"

It was Mark Breen. At his first word the ranch yard was full of armed men. They appeared at the corners of sheds and buildings, rose from behind the adobe walls of the corrals, stepped out of doorways.

CHAPTER IX

Breen's Vengeance

A PERFECT trap! The significance of it struck Dusty Fenton overpoweringly. For the first time in his tempestuous life he was ready to admit defeat. Frozen in his tracks he stood, uttering not a word, swept by despair. But when Mark Breen, gun in hand, stepped from the shadowed door of the barn, a kind of tingling shock traveled over him. This was a far different Mark Breen than the one who had faced him in the Oasis Saloon only twenty-four hours ago!

That man had been suave, immaculate, calmly sure of himself. This man was booted and spurred and grey with dust; crossed gunbelts sagged from his lean waist. But the change was not in his dress, nor in the black beard stubble that darkened his jaws, nor in the harsh lines that strangely marred the chiseled handsomeness of his features.

It was an inner change, subtle and startling, that caught and held the spidery cowboy's attention. Something had disturbed Mark Breen powerfully. It had cracked the shell and left exposed the real man.

"MOTHER!" Mary Harkness' scream cut through the momentary silence. "What have you done to her, Mark Breen? If you've—"

"Shut up!" rasped Breen. "The ol' lady hasn't been hurt. It ain't her that brought me here, you fool! Hoke, pull that varmint's fangs!"

His hawk-face distorted by a grin of malevolent triumph, Hoke Menlo moved swiftly behind Dusty, lifted the guns from his holsters. But the cowboy hardly noticed. His attention remained focused upon Breen, freshly fixed by the gleam in the man's dark eyes as they rested upon Mary.

Women as a sex were of no interest to Dusty. None, since his mother died, had played any part in his hard life. None, he judged, would ever do so. But what he read in Mark Breen's gloating glance sent a second shock jarring over him.

For in that look, and in the faint sound of Mary's withdrawal from it, he found an entrance to Breen's mind. This girl was no more to Dusty than any other woman would have been—except that she was his brother's intended bride. By the same token, he understood her value in the estimation of Mark Breen. Through her Breen meant to strike cruelly at Cliff and at Will Harkness.

That he dared even to contemplate such a thing, was proof that the man had indeed gone wolf! Other-

wise, no matter what evil schemes he might invent to strengthen his hold upon this range where he had entrenched himself, he would never include in them any activity that involved a woman. This was the unwritten law.

"He's on the run!" The key to it flashed suddenly through Dusty's sharpened mind. "His big plans have fell through an' he's on his way out! He staged this play for a special reason; me stumblin' into it was a break he hadn't counted on. Whatever happened was plenty sudden, else he'd never have troubled to have Billy took to the Circle B. He meant to run a bluff with the boy, but this is different!"

Swiftly and powerfully he reacted now from the despair of defeat. Far more than his own life was at stake. Everything that had happened before this became of little significance.

This was a newly dealt hand. And, as Breen himself had said, jokers were wild! Abruptly Dusty thrust aside the weariness that dragged at him, set himself resolutely to play through against the stacked deck. Again cool, quick thinking, clear headed, he made the first play deliberately.

"ALLUS did rate yuh yeller in a showdown, Mark," he sneered. "But I shore didn't do yuh credit by a long shot. Huh! A man, if he has a grievance, settles it personal. But yuh fetch along an army—an' take no chances!"

Breen's glance shifted from the girl, clashed with that of the cowboy.

"When I've a grievance," he said sharply, "I settle it my own way, Fenton!"

Dusty laughed jeeringly.

"I'll tell a man yuh do! Not so sane, mebbe, but plenty safe for Mark Breen. Yore yeller ain't a streak, it goes plumb through from hide to hide. Well," he shrugged contemptuously, "havin' took my guns an' havin' yore army ready, this should be safe enough. Get about it. I'd ruther die than to have to stand here lookin' at yuh!"

Breen's hard face turned livid, and yellow flame seemed to flick between his narrowed eyelids. But it was Hoke Menlo, holding a gun carefully in his left hand, who snarled and swayed forward to slap Dusty across the mouth with force that staggered him.

"YUH talk too much, runt! By God—no, yuh don't!"

Lunging furiously, Dusty swung at the hawk-faced *hombre*. But Menlo ducked the blow and rammed the end of his gun hard into the smaller man's stomach.

"Hoke!" rasped Breen. "Lay off, yuh fool! I'm runnin' this."

"Just lemme—"

"Back up, I say!"

Snarling sullenly, Menlo moved back a couple of paces. Dusty grunted from the jab of the gunbarrel, turned again to face Breen, spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Two of a kind. Both jacks, I'd say, only that would shore be an insult to an honest breed of critters!"

Cold fury surged through him. If it hadn't been for the handicap of the girl's presence, he would have taken on the lot of them single-handed and unarmed. Behind him he heard her gasping breath.

"Yuh asked for it," grated Breen. "Keep yore mouth shut. Yuh won't have long to wait. Gila, hobble him! Leo, fetch the lady over where she can watch the show."

Mary screamed and darted past Dusty, pursued by a grinning gunman. A hand closed on the cowboy's left wrist—and he went berserk. Wheeling with the tug at his arm, he sent his elbow into something soft, broke free and landed a terrific,

left-handed wallop on Menlo's jaw. Then they swarmed him.

He fought like a cornered wildcat, punching, kicking, clawing, gouging. He banged two heads together, drove his boot heel at a convenient shin, went down under a wave of cursing men.

They flattened him. A blow on the head made him see sparks. A heavy weight settled on his stomach. He was spread-eagled, held there writhing and panting.

"Lemme at him!" howled Menlo, aiming a kick at his head.

It was Breen himself who shoved the hawk-faced man violently away.

"Yuh wild-eyed fool! Get hold of yoreself before I work yuh over! Fenton, yuh wasted consider'ble energy—an' got nowhere. Now yuh mebbe understand I mean business!"

"Put a gun in my belt!" panted Dusty. "I'll take on yuh an' that Menlo skunk both together!"

Breen smiled viciously. "I've got other plans."

"Safer—"

An ill smelling paw clamped over his mouth and nose, remained there until he was all but smothered. Then he was hauled roughly to his feet. Two men held him; a third stood behind and jammed the business end of a gun against his spine.

NEAR the back door of the ranchhouse he saw Mary, white faced and wide eyed with horror, in the grip of the gunman, Gila, a swarthy halfbreed of venomous appearance. Someone else by this time had cut Buck Lanning loose, and the renegade was being doused with water.

At Breen's signal the men who held Dusty dragged and shoved him toward one of the smaller barns. Even as they forced him through the wide door into semi-darkness, sharp commands started brisk activity in the ranch yard.

Fresh horses were being caught, saddles changed, preparations made for departure.

All of this was significant. Among other things, it meant that whatever fate was in store for Dusty, would be soon coming, meted out there at the Crooked H.

The nature of his fate did not concern him. He was resigned to death. The thing that sickened him was the knowledge that he had failed Cliff in this emergency.

IT was not long until Breen came into the barn. Then, victor and vanquished, they confronted each other as if those others who held Dusty in their grasp did not exist. For a long moment they stared at each other straight and hard, grim men both, hard men, alike only in a single quality.

In spite of the sneers with which he had attempted to inflame his enemy into some unguarded act, Dusty recognized that Mark Breen was a real fighting man, a man of stubborn and unbreakable will and courage.

But Breen did not delay now in making known the full measure of the vengeance he had planned.

"Yo're goin' to die, Fenton," stated the outlaw harshly. "Yo're goin' to die the way I want yuh to die—slow an' hard. Yuh've been a jinx from the day we met. I hate the sight of yuh—but that ain't news. Things was breakin' right for me here—I had my hand on this range—when yuh come along. Yesterday it was. The jinx worked fast this time!"

"Yeller belly's on the run again!" Dusty sneered. "What kinda hell has caught up with yuh this time?"

Breen cursed savagely. "It ain't yore business, but no harm can come of yore knowin'. That punk sheriff was too nosy. He looked up the family of ol' Baldwin that owned the Circle B. I never heard about it till last night—an' then it was too late.

He's sent for a U. S. marshal! Should have killed the meddlin' fool a long time ago!"

"Murder," said Dusty grimly, "is one of yore best sidelines. So yuh killed Baldwin—which is why he was never heard about no more by his neighbors here. An' Forbes got on yore trail. Well, I gotta hand it to the sheriff. He deserved better'n yuh gave him, Mark."

"The ol' fool ain't dead!" snarled Breen. "Them idjuts that handled the jail job messed it up. But this is one job I'm handlin' personal, Fenton. Yuh won't wiggle out of it. This shed yo're in is full of stuff that burns easy. Some straw, a little feed, a few cans of kerosene. Yo're goin' to sample hell before yuh get to it! While yo're roastin' yuh can ponder yore brother's enjoyment when he reads the note I'm leavin' him. Him an' Harkness!"

"Yo're a low-down skunk, Mark Breen," muttered Dusty. "I ain't afraid to die. Likewise, I'd ruther have the hell yuh've laid out for me than risk the one yo're goin' to! What about the boy? Are yuh—"

"The boy ain't important. That was one of Lanning's ideas, an' not such a good one. He reckoned we could scare the ol' man into tradin' this spread for the brat. But now—"

HE shrugged, stepped back a little, went on coldly yet with a kind of gloating savageness to detail his plan.

"See them rings up there on the wall, Fenton? We're runnin' ropes down from them to yore wrists. They'll be just tight enough so's yuh can get yore toes to the floor. There'll be another rope around yo're stomach, tied to that lower ring. *Sabe?* Yuh'll hang, Fenton—not too easy! An' while yo're hangin' that fire will be creepin' closer an' closer. Yuh can watch it come! Get to it, boys."

CHAPTER X

Showdown

OFFERING no resistance, Dusty let the men who held his arms shove him back against the wall. He stood with his head tipped forward a little, slumping. Breen watched, gun in hand. Hoke Menlo swayed forward and jabbed the end of his weapon into the cowboy's middle, and his arms were released while ropes were run through the rings high on the wooden partition wall.

"I'm shore sorry yo're passin' out this way," snarled Menlo. "Would of suited me to—"

The gun in his hand was cocked. He shoved against it lightly. One of the other men grabbed Dusty's left arm, twisted it up to shove his hand through a small loop. The cowboy's spidery body twisted sharply. His right hand slapped over and down, drove the gun sharply to the side.

The thunder of the shot was deafening in that enclosed space. The flame scorched Dusty's flesh, and the lead groved his thigh. But his clamping fingers closed hard upon the action of the weapon, jammed it.

At the same instant a vicious kick sent Menlo staggering directly in the path of Mark Breen's bullet. A wrench and a jerk freed Dusty's left hand, brought it down chopping at the neck of the startled man who'd gripped it. A whirling leap carried the cowboy across the room.

Breen's second bullet nicked his shoulder as he dropped. One of the other outlaws fired and missed. Dusty had Menlo's gun—four shots, and four men shooting at him!

Through swirling gunsmoke in the half light of that room of hell he squinted at Mark Breen's snarling face. A single purpose lived in him;

from his knees he fired, heaved sideways, felt the jarring impact of hot lead.

The earth beneath him seemed to heave and surge. He felt the gun in his hand jump and jerk, felt himself pitching forward into pain wracked blackness. But the stubborn will to do set his teeth, stiffened his sagging muscles.

HIS vision cleared momentarily, showed him the face of Breen, snarling still, moving away from him. He raised his hand, and then the face was gone, and he toppled slowly forward across the body of a dead man, while outside sounded yells and gunshots and the drumming of hoofs.

Unconsciousness held him then, but he was fighting again through that hell of lead and gunsmoke when he opened his eyes and scowled up into the worried face of his brother. For a moment it was not Cliff's face. His lips drew back in a snarl; he struggled to lift himself against the prodigious weight that crushed him.

"Breen!" he muttered thickly. "Breen—"

"Easy, ol' boy!" said Cliff gently, and shoved him back upon the bed. "The fight's over. Breen's dead—an' Menlo's dead—an' the gang is busted up. Yuh done a job—although it ain't human nor reasonable to believe it! The marshal's posse—we left town early an' met Shorty halfway on the trail. Got here in time to clean up the sweepin's. Them that didn't run for it is on their way to jail."

For a moment longer Dusty stared, not wholly believing it. At last, grinning wearily, the tension went out of him.

"Then," he murmured, "I reckon it's—all right—to catch up on—some shut-eye, ol' maverick. Got to get rested up, yuh see. After the weddin' I'll be driftin'. It's gonna be—too blamed peaceful hereabouts!"

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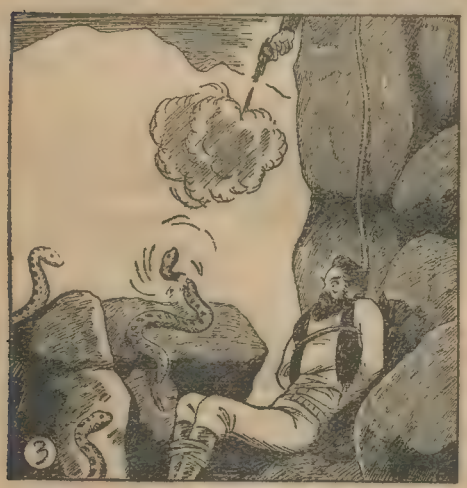
Rattlesnake Canyon

A Six-Gun Sandy Adventure in Pictures

Trailing a bunch of rustlers, Sheriff Sandy spies three masked men branding a calf. Sandy swings off his roan and creeps closer, gun in hand. "Raise 'em high, *hombres!*" snaps the young sheriff. His gun flames as one of the men grabs for a Colt. The outlaws cash in their chips!

"I wonder what happened to Jed Peters," Sandy murmurs. "He's been looking for these outlaws, too." Reaching the edge of a cliff, Sandy gasps with horror. Several masked men are lowering Peters into a ravine! The sheriff's gun barks. Bullets whizzing about them, the rustlers dash away!



"I'm comin', Jed," shouts Sandy as he runs forward. Then he sees the dastardly plot! Jed has been lowered into a den of rattlesnakes! As the old plainsman gazes at the writhing forms, one of the rattlers coils, ready to strike! *Bang!* Sandy's bullet kills the snake. He draws Jed up.

In his concern over Jed, Sandy does not notice that one of the masked outlaws is lurking behind a boulder. The man aims his gun at the young sheriff! There is a faint click as the weapon fails to fire. With a curse, the outlaw leaps on Sandy, a vicious knife gleaming in his hand. They fight grimly!

[Turn page]

Sandy grabs the wrist that holds the knife! His hard fist smacks against the chin beneath the mask! The rustler breaks free and whirls! "Got yuh now," he grunts, thrusting the knife close to Sandy's heart. The sheriff suddenly closes in, sends the outlaw plunging down into the midst of the snakes!

Then a volley of lead spatters all about Sandy and Jed! The outlaws have trapped them on the top of the cliff! Sandy ties his lariat to a tree. Rope in hand he hurtles across a yawning chasm, in a daring leap. Jed is too shaken by his narrow escape to make the jump. The outlaws are close!

'Come on, Jed, quick!" shouts Sandy as he ties the lariat to a boulder on the opposite cliff. Hand over hand the old plainsman crosses the gorge while Sandy's reloaded gun snarls defiance at the outlaws. Their irons roar—but Jed reaches safety. Sandy and Jed dash to their hidden mounts.

Later in the afternoon, they are circling around, hoping to get in close to the outlaws without being seen. "Stampede!" shouts Sandy as they hear the thunder of hoofs. "Comin' this way." A moment later they are in the path of the outlaws' stampeding herd! Jed's horse stumbles and throws him.

With horns lowered, a maddened steer dashes toward Jed, who has been knocked out by his fall. Sandy rides furiously to the spot! He leaps from his mount to the steer's back. With all his strength he grabs the critter's horns and twists. As the steer wavers, Sandy leaps to the ground and brings it down!

The herd thunders by. Behind it come the desperate outlaws! Sandy and the now revived Jed swing into their saddles! "Let 'em have it!" growls the young sheriff. With roaring guns they fight savagely. A bullet goes through Sandy's arm. Three of the outlaws cash their chips!

With the three remaining outlaws in grim pursuit, Sandy and Jed pace down another ravine. "Are yuh bad hit?" asked Jed. "Got my arm," answers Sandy. "Shore broke a bone th' way it hurts. But I can still manage my ole six-gun left-handed," he grins. They fire at the approaching rustlers.

Protected by some rocks at the mouth of the ravine, they keep slinging lead! Finally, with two of the three men badly wounded, the outlaws scatter! Later, Sandy finds the stolen herd, trapped in a blind canyon. Again he has outwitted the human polecats of the ranges!

Next Month: SIX-GUN SANDY in COLT LAW

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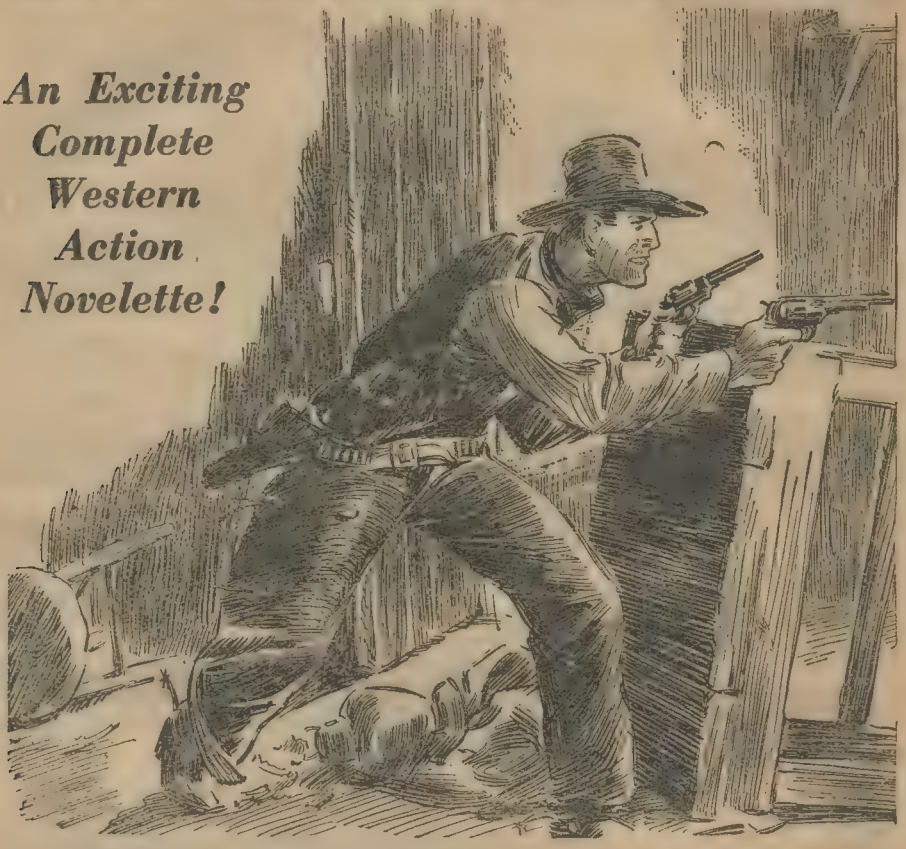

CHAPTER I

A Hired Gunman

SMILING BILLY BOND knew, the instant he looked into the bleak eyes of the lanky, wolf-faced, two-gun man, that he had been marked for death. Billy had not noticed the man until the fellow had reeled heavily into him in Aguilar's cantina a mile south of the line. Billy had turned with his characteristic good-natured smile on his lips, meaning to excuse the other's drunken clumsiness, but his grin had vanished when he had seen that the man was suddenly cold sober.

The two-gun man snarled fiercely: "Kid you done that a-purpose!" And then he grabbed up a glass of liquor, cursed luridly, and flung the fiery liquid straight at Billy's eyes.

Billy Bond mopped his very red face on the ends of his black neckerchief, the while the small crowd in the border dive held its breath and waited. Jose Aguilar hunched his short, corpulent body and gripped the lower end of the bar, ready to duck when lead started flying. To one of his bartenders he whispered from beneath his waxed mustache:

"Dios! The long one is a fool! The kid will shoot his heart out! A fiery whirlwind with his six-guns, is the young one!"

But Billy Bond did not fly into action, although his blood was as

Smiling, Fast-Shooting Billy Bond Bucks the Ornery

SIX-GUNS

By CLAUDE RISTER
Author of "Smoky Trail," etc.

The room shuddered with a terrific detonation as lead smashed into the table

hot as the liquor which had been flung into his eyes. As he reached mechanically into a vest pocket for cigarette makings, he apparently was cool; but secretly he was wondering why the stranger wanted a gunfight.

"An' so the Jasons sent you here to get me, huh, feller?" the cowboy drawled, as a possible explanation of the situation flashed through his mind.

A startled look swept across the face of the other. Billy knew thereby that he had guessed the truth. His lips twisted in a smile. "Uh-huh, I thought so. Well, fella, you went at the job the wrong way. You shoulda dry-gulched me. That's the way the Jasons do it. You see the way it is now, I might beat you to the draw an' gun you out."

It sounded like a foolish remark, for the man's arms were bowed and his long, bony fingers were hooked, ready to sweep the two huge Colts from their holsters. The kid's brown hands were breast high as he steadily worked with his cigarette. Still grinning, Billy Bond drawled on.

"If you still feel lucky, *hombre*, go ahead an' pull 'em; otherwise you'd better be headin' for the door. Unless you either draw or start ramblin' outa this place before I git this here quirly finished, I'm goin' to give you the dangest gun whuppin' any lousy, skunk-eatin' coyote

Jason Brothers—Thieving Polecats of the Ranchlands!

ever had." The grey eyes in his tanned visage were glittering dangerously above his taut smile.

For just an instant, surprise mingled with faint admiration showed on the long, deathly face; and then the man snarled:

"Spoilin' fer a fight, huh, rooster? Well, you can shore have it. No feller in the world can knock me reelin', then talk big an' git away with it. Here's drawin', kid!"

The tensed fingers, which already had been nearly touching the sleek butts of the two guns, swept the dingy .45s from their scarred holsters. At that instant Billy Bond's right hand was holding a cigarette to his lips, and the petrified spectators there in the cantina were certain that the young cowboy was doomed. No man in the world could drop a hand from mouth to hip and still beat a practiced gunman to the draw.

But Jose Aguilar knew something which the other men did not. He knew that Smiling Billy Bond was left handed. That the gun at his right hip was there largely for the purpose of throwing such killers as his present antagonist off guard.

AS the twin Colts of the lanky man snapped from their holsters, Billy's left hand darted into his open shirt front. He flung himself away from the bar, just as guns began to thunder.

One of the tall man's slugs burned a hole through a flap of the cowboy's pinto vest. Billy's sudden leap had saved him from receiving the lead in the stomach. The other bullet slashed widely past him at an angle, and ripped into the bar.

In that stunning instant the amazed spectators had seen the quick stabs of flame through Billy Bond's checkered shirt, at a point just below the left armpit. The cowboy had fired twice from the bosom of his shirt. His first bullet had smashed into the wolf-man's left shoulder, causing the hand on that side to drop its flaming weapon. His second had rapped against the cylinder of the other Colt, deflecting the aim of the weapon, then scooting aside and tearing a bloody path across the back of the hand.

Both the huge Colts banged to the floor. The lanky man staggered back, cursing and gritting his teeth in pain. Billy Bond reholstered his shoulder gun with a quick shove, and then jerked his left hand from his shirt front and quickly smothered the small fire that was burning just below his right armpit. His bronzed young face was hard, as he swung back toward the gunman.

"I COULDA drilled you, fella," he snapped. "An' maybe I shoulda done it."

The man looked at his wounded shoulder; then at his bleeding hand; then back at the waddy who once more was fashioning a cigarette and eyeing him keenly.

"Yeah, I reckon you could."

"Maybe the reason I didn't was that I wanted to find out how-come the Jason brothers—Zack, an' Wirt, an' Morg—sent you here to gun me."

"They didn't," mumbled the other. "I reckon I'd had a snort of liquor too much, an—"

"Liar! You was cold sober when you faced me. Now, spill it."

"I gotta find a doctor," mumbled the gunman, and he started toward the door. But Billy stopped him.

"No, you don't, *hombre;* not until you've talked," he said with cold calmness. "Better hurry. You might ketch gangrene, er bleed to death, or somethin'. Of course, not that I care. It would be doggoned good riddance."

The other gave him a roving look, and then spoke in a voice from which all the fight was gone.

"All right, kid; I'm whupped," he whined. "I'll come clean. Might as well, fer I reckon I won't be tellin' you nothin' you ain't already guessed. You've raided the Jason herds so many times you've got them three brothers pullin' their hair an' cussin' blue blazes."

Billy Bond's mouth spread in a wide grin. The other man went on:

"Havin' failed time an' agin to nab you, the Jasons are desperate. You've made no secret of the fact you hang out down here. They couldn't send the law into the outlaw town to git you, so they sent me. Kin I go?"

Billy picked up the man's fallen guns and shoved them into their holsters. "Listen, fella; I want you to ride back to the Rafter J Bar ranch an' tell the Jasons for me that I ain't no more'n started raidin' their herds yet. That they're still owin' two thousand, six hunnert an' thirty dollars to that ol' aunt of mine they cheated, an' that I aim to collect every danged nickel of it before I let up. Now git!"

Like a whipped cur the fellow slunk from the cantina and out into the early night.

JOSE AGUILAR had straightened up and was twirling his waxed mustache and smiling. He caught Billy's eyes, beckoned, then turned and went waddling down the room. He disappeared through a rear door. After a minute Billy followed him.

When Billy Bond got into Aguilar's private office the fat, sleek little Mexican was sitting at a table with a stack of gold pieces before him. "Here eet ees, my frand; t'ree hunnert dollar for the cows zhu deleever to my men las' night. Eet was another gran' sooksess. No?"

Billy nodded, counted the money, and pocketed it.

Aguilar leaned toward him, waved oily hands, and smiled ingratiatingly. "My yoong frand, why zhu do not leesen to my advice? Why zhu do not join me in my gran' scheme? As a rustler zhu are the mos' sooksessful man. Now if zhu would take charge of my *vaqueros*, an—"

"No. I ain't really a rustler. What I take from the Jasons is only collections on a debt they owe a pore ol' aunt of mine."

Aguilar sighed, shrugged. "Wheen weel zhu have for me som' more of the Jason cattle, then?"

"In the next two, three nights maybe."

A few minutes before nine o'clock that night Billy Bond walked into a combination general store and post office in the very small town of Wildhorse, a few miles north of the Mexican line. He purchased a post office money order, and wrote a brief letter which read in part:

> Well, Aunt Delly, here's another payment by the Jasons. Fine, ain't it, that they got religion and decided to make up for the past? There's a chance they'll pay off the balance in full before long. . . .

He mailed the letter and the money order and left the little building. Just outside the door he stopped abruptly. His right hand flashed to his hip. His left darted into his always open shirt front. For standing before him was a rawboned, mournful-looking old man with extremely long drooping mustaches. It was Matt Purtle, the sheriff.

CHAPTER II

Stampede!

THE grizzled peace officer spat tobacco juice and drawled: "Why all the hasty diggin' for hardware, son?"

Billy smiled, but he did not remove his hands from his gun butts. "Thought you might be lookin' for me, Sheriff."

"Uh-uh; not a-tall. Jest down this

way on a leetle business. Saw you go in the post office an' thought I'd have a talk with you. Where'd you git the idy I might be wantin' to arrest you?"

"Well, it's rumored I been rustlin' cows from the Jason brothers."

"The Jasons ain't made no complaint to me—but then they pride themse'ves on bein' able to run their own spread without he'p from the law. Besides, they ain't got no use for me noway. I'm warnin' you, though, Billy, if they ever do come to me I'll have to do my dooty."

BILLY'S hands quit the butts of his guns. He drew tobacco and brown papers. "You won't have to do much investigatin', Matt. You're purty well acquainted with the situation right now. You know how the Jasons had been tryin' to run my uncle out. How they fin'ly caught him in a jam an' tried to buy his little outfit for a song. When he ordered 'em off the place they told 'im he'd misunderstood 'em all along, and offered to lend 'im five thousand to set 'im on his feet.

"Uncle Tod an' Aunt Delly were suspicious; so the Jasons brought out five thousand an' a notary with papers, an' laid the cash on the table. You know how on the way to town to deposit the money Uncle Tod was dry-gulched an' the five thousand stole. The Jasons were suspected, but the law couldn't prove 'em guilty.

"My aunt saw no way out of the financial boghole; besides she was scared to death of the Jasons; so when they offered her two thousand cash to sign over everything an' git out, she done it.

"Uncle had figured his outfit was dirt cheap at twelve thousand dollars net. I've made broad allowances, though an' charged the Jasons with only the five thousand dollars they stole. To date I've sold twenty-three hunnert an' seventy dollars' worth of cows for their credit, an' sent the *dinero* to my aunt. That leaves a balance of twenty-six hunnert an' thirty bucks yet to come.

"When the last of that debt is cleaned up, I'll then see what can be done about having them Jasons pay another'ne. I mean for the murder of Uncle Tod, who was like a daddy to me."

"But you admitted a while ago that nobody's ever been able to prove the Jasons had anythin' to do with the murder."

"I said the law hadn't. As far as I'm concerned the fact that they volunteered to loan my uncle five thousand dollars after they'd been tryin' to run 'im out, was proof enough. They'd never have put up the money if they hadn't meant to rob 'em of it. Besides, Jose Aguilar told me some time back that Morg Jason come to him shortly after the killin' an' traded 'im five thousand dollars in twenty-dollar gold pieces for Mex currency, payin' a premium on the deal. Now the gold which was stole was in twenties."

"Whyn't you come to me with this infermation before, son?"

"What woulda been the use? You couldn't git Aguilar over here to testify, an' even if you could, his word wouldn't convict the powerful Jasons."

"Billy, personal, I've allus believed the Jasons guilty, but one crime don't excuse another'ne. You better start ridin' straight before you run smack into trouble. So long." Abruptly he turned and strode away.

JUST at dark on the following night Billy Bond was sitting his mount on a hilltop, looking down into a far-flung coulee wherein the Rafter J Bar roundup outfit was encamped. As he studied the scene below him he was a lone wolf planning a raid.

He saw a black lake of cattle; a smudge that was the chuck wagon; a fire whose flickering light played upon shadowy human forms. Beyond were breaks, and then rugged black hills. Billy Bond pricked his mount gently with rowels and went down a slender, twisting trail. At the foot of the slope he paused and again studied the layout. He lifted his head and let the night breeze play upon his face, catching the exact direction from which the wind was coming. He moved around until he had placed himself directly between the breeze and the center of the herd, and then he dismounted.

"Sorry, little hoss," he murmured, "but here's where you lose yore mane an' tail."

His sharp cutting knife haggled away the pony's mane, and the long hair at the end of the tail. He was careful to inflict no wound. He piled the severed hair upon a small, dry tumbleweed, touched a lighted match to the weed; then went quickly to his pony and swung up.

Range wise Billy Bond knew that nothing strikes uneasiness to the heart of cattle more quickly than does the smell of burning hair. The intervening bushes and ground-rolls would prevent the two night herdsmen from seeing the tiny fire, but the pungent odor of burning hair would reach the cattle and render them agitatedly susceptible to stampede, if indeed it did not at once send them pounding away in mad flight.

BILLY loped along a sandy-bottomed arroyo until he was within a hundred yards of the bedded down herd, and then he moved out into the open and drew rein.

He smiled as he noted that already the herd was on its feet and milling. Uneasy bawls came from that agitated sea of bodies. A nighthawk in an attempt to quiet them was wailing a song. Another herdsman was riding hard toward the chuck wagon.

With a jab of his spurs Billy rode straight toward the milling mass, yelling like a madman.

Pow! pow! pow! his six-gun began barking as he charged up toward the herd.

Instantly the cattle were in stampede, the black sea of bodies rolling swiftly away before his advance. He kept after them, shooting and yelling, for he wanted to do a thorough job of scattering them.

The earth shook to a pounding of hoofs. At first the cattle went storming away southward, and then trees, gullies, shafts of rocks and hillocks sent them scattering in all directions. The whole night appeared to be teeming with rushing bulks that crashed madly through the bushes. The air was filled with the hoarse bawls of insanely terrified cow brutes.

From the direction of the wagon, riders came streaking. Billy Bond laughed recklessly as he spurred along. "The Jasons are a-cussin' blue blazes about now," he thought. As for the nighthawk who had remained with the herd, the form of that horseman had been lost in the tremendous rush.

SMILING BILLY BOND rode until he was at the foot of the hills which stood on the south side of the coulee; then he singled out a small bunch of cattle that were just disappearing into a canyon and he went for them. "About the proper number, an' headed in the right direction," he thought.

From behind a rock spurted fire. The sharp report of a rifle rapped against the walls of the gulch. Billy Bond's pony was shot dead. The animal went hurtling, to strike with a heavy thud and sent the rider flying. Billy crashed through the top of a

cedar shrub. He picked himself up and began running.

Crack! Crack! Bullets snapped past him, and screamed from rocks. He was darting like a rabbit from stone shaft to stone shaft. He had emptied his own six-shooter and could not fight back.

There was a clashing of hoofs on stone, and a flying of sparks from beneath steel shoes, as the rest of the Rafter J Bar outfit came storming into the gulch. The Jasons were willing to let the cattle go for the time being, in order to kill the reckless young lone wolf who had become a scourge to their ranch.

"IT'S the kid, all right," yelled the man who had been shooting. "I drilled his pony an' he went dodgin' up there among them snagrocks."

"After him!" bawled the hoarse voice of Morg Jason, eldest of the three brothers. They had pulled up and jerked their rifles from saddle boots. Now they began scattering, and advancing on the run.

Billy Bond had stopped behind a lump of stone on the west slope of the canyon. Squatted there, he hastily punched out shells from the cylinders of his two guns. As he worked he kept glancing over the top of the rock, watching the movements of the Rafter J Bar men.

They had ceased their first precipitate rush, and now were moving at a swift, alert walk, their skirmish line sweeping like a dragnet across the canyon floor and toward the slope on which he was hidden.

He glanced behind him. Up there, fifteen yards away, the stones and shrubbery ended. Beyond, to the rim of the slope forty yards farther above, was barren ground. If he tried to cross that open space he would make a good target, even in the darkness, and would be riddled before he could reach the top.

Billy Bond licked suddenly dry lips, then muttered aloud: "It looks like they've got me trapped—unless I shoot my way through."

CHAPTER III

"Kill Him! Kill Him!"

ONCE more the cornered waddy's eyes studied the scene below. So thick were the stone shafts that it was like gazing over a hillside cemetery. Most of the men were bearing slightly to his right, working on the theory that he would move southward along the canyon slope and away from them. Only the right wing of the skirmish line was sweeping through the rocks and shrubs in his vicinity.

Billy went humping down into a wash. He picked up a stone and waited.

He heard footsteps and voices, drawing steadily nearer. He waited until they were within a few feet of him; then threw the rock. It landed in a clump of manzanitas some thirty yards away. The footsteps stopped. Rifles spoke. A hail of lead tore into the clump of manzanitas. Some of the men went running toward it.

Billy Bond slipped from the wash and started leaping as softly as possible, down the steep little wash. But of a sudden he lurched to a stop. A human form had appeared less than fifteen feet from him.

The man let out a startled grunt and swung his Winchester, but a six-gun is quicker to bring to bear than a rifle. *Pow!* The Colt which Billy was holding spouted flame. The man spun around, dropped his rifle, came sliding down the slope. His Winchester followed him, clattering along the rocks. The human bulk piled up in a limp heap right in front of the cowboy.

Billy Bond jerked the man's face

upward, saw that he was only creased; then snatched the fallen rifle and went springing on down the steep wash.

He heard men yelling excitedly. They were above him now. Once more his heart pounded in exultation. He had got through all right. He knew by the shouts that none of the men knew exactly from what spot the six-gun report had come.

He was almost back to the foot of the slope. Glancing behind him he saw shadowy forms swarming on the hillside.

"Look! Tarp's been shot!" called one of the men.

"The kid must have run down the wash," came the nasal voice of Wirt Jason.

"There he goes. Dodgin' among the tombstones!" bellowed the bass one of Zack Jason. "Riddle 'im, men!"

Farther up the canyon Morg Jason shouted raucously: "Kill him! Kill him! A hundred dollars to the man who burns him down!"

It would have been a difficult promise to fulfill. Half a dozen rifles spoke at once, and had Billy been killed, no one could have told whose bullet had laid him low. The shots were wild, though, for the shooters were catching only flitting glimpses of the human target. Nevertheless, the spat, scream and whine of lead were decidedly unpleasant to Billy's ears.

SHELTERED by a bank at the bottom of the canyon, Billy Bond sprinted for the horses. He turned across the deep wash down there, broke through a fringe of bushes, and whispered an exclamation of elation. The horses were right in front of him.

As he snatched the reins of a long-legged black horse, he threw another glance to the hillside. The human shadows were coming down pellmell, tearing up stones that raced ahead of them. Apparently they all had lost trace of the human quarry, for the shooting had ceased. The three Jasons were cursing and furiously shouting orders.

Billy straddled leather. His glancing eyes picked out the lunging, plunging, burly form of Morg Jason. He had spotted the man by the hated, raucous voice.

The cowboy could not resist the temptation—he flung the captured rifle to his shoulder, took quick aim, and fired.

MORG JASON cursed more loudly and luridly than before. Billy let out a taunting laugh and drove with his spurs. A few jumps of the black horse carried him behind a blunt, rocky point. A volley of shots crashed out. Leaden hail beat against the cliff-shoulder which he had placed between himself and his enemies. It had taken the men on the hillside a few seconds to slide to the stop, steady themselves, and cut loose with their rifles.

Billy Bond reared his new mount to a halt. "*Adios*, you Jason skunks! I'll be troublin' you again soon!" And then once more he gouged with his spurs and went streaking into the night.

This time Smiling Billy Bond did not ride for Mexico, as he had done following each of his raids in the past. He knew an old squatter who lived twenty miles to the west. He would go there, for he had need of a wagon and team.

He came within sight of the shack just as an oblong moon slid from behind the hills to the east, and cast a faint illumination into the shallow valley within which the little frame house sat.

Billy rode to the shack and called: "Hello!" but there was no response. He called again and heard a groan.

He swung down, drew a six-gun, flung open the door. He was flat-

tened beside the frame as with a glance his eyes swept the interior of the single-roomed shack. He saw a man stretched out on a bunk in a corner. A bar of moonlight showed the face of the nester.

"WHAT'S the matter, ol'-timer?" Billy asked as he went in.

"Who are you?" the other mumbled.

"I'm the cowpoke who stopped here not long ago to fill up with water. You ought to remember me by this pinto vest."

The other nodded slowly. "I'm glad you've come. I'm a mighty sick man. Need a doc. Got along until today, but laid down—and—"

The whisper died. The tired eyes closed. Billy shook him gently, but got no response.

Young Billy Bond rode forty miles more that night, and brought back a doctor. "Poor diet, spring cold, bad heart, rundown condition," was the physician's diagnosis. "He should pull out of it all right, but needs some one with him for a while."

"Don't worry, Doc," Billy promised. "He'll be looked after."

The next day he rode to the camp of a near-by sheepherder and hired a Mexican boy to stay with the squatter. Billy then borrowed the old man's rundown spring wagon and spare-ribbed team, and disappeared.

The convalescing squatter was beginning to worry about his outfit, when up turned the tow-headed waddy as smiling as ever. "Had some work to do a good ways from here," was all the information that he would give.

The next day he said: "I know you need a little money, ol'-timer, to buy grub an' keep the Mex kid hired until you're able to do yore work again. Now I expect to pass this way bound fer Mexico in a few days, an' likely I'll be carryin' some money belongin' to an aunt of mine. She won't care if I lend you a few dollars."

Again he disappeared. The old squatter and the Mexican lad wondered where he had gone—but it was not long before the Jason brothers knew.

CHAPTER IV

Billy Demands a Payoff

FOR four days—fifty miles—the herd of the Jason brothers had crawled along. Since the morning following the first encampment of the drive, dour, barrel-chested, thick-limbed Morg Jason had been muttering behind his heavy mustache:

"I'm s'prised we ain't seen hide ner hair uv Billy Bond. Skeered out? Don't you b'lieve it. The scalawag's up to somethin'. Me, I'm plumb oneasy. I wisht we had these here cows deelivered. If thet dealer at Lopoc should turn 'em down—" He growled profanely.

"We got 'im signed up on paper," reminded Wirt, youngest of the Jason trio, a blond giant with the face of a gorilla. "How kin he back out?"

"Shet up, Wirt," Zack Jason said disgustedly, as he hunched his short, burly bulk in his saddle and screwed his brindled eyes to pinpoints, "You never did have no gumption, nohow. Don't you savvy what Morg means? There's a time limit for deliv'ry, an' with beef prices sinkin' ever' day, said buyer would be plumb glad if we didn't arrive on time. He could then slither out from under his deal."

"But we got plenty o' time."

"Yeah," growled swarthy Morg, "pervidin' things don't happen to delay us overly. A loss of a few days

would ruin the deal. I wisht we could hear from Billy Bond," he finished in a mumble. "A enemy in the open ain't half as dangerous an' nerve-gittin' as one in the brush."

About mid-afternoon of the fifth day of the drive, Morg and Wirt were riding point. The cattle were approaching a long, barren hill that presented a solid front of painted cliffs as far as eyes could see to east or to west. Apparently that gigantic barrier was impassable, but the Jasons knew that just between the two mighty horns of rock up there three miles away, a narrow pass admitted to the open country beyond.

"Look, Morg," said Wirt. "What's that?"

A hundred yards ahead was a signboard. They rode to it and read:

JASONS:

Better stop herd here and come ahead to the pass—important.

Yores,
BILLY BOND.

THE two giants, the blond young one and the swarthy one with the heavy black mustache, looked at each other dumbly for a moment. "What do you reckon?" Wirt asked.

Morg cursed savagely. "I dunnuh, but you can bet we're in fer more trouble with that whelp of hell. Better ride back an' tell the boys to take it easy. I'll go ahead an' find out what's what."

Morg Jason rode right to the mouth of the pass before drawing rein; then sitting his mount he cursed long and savagely. To a depth of some fifty feet the pass was filled with a maze of barbed wire.

"Hi, you big hunk o' sin."

Morg Jason glanced upward. Billy Bond's grinning face was looking over a block of fallen stone that rested on a ledge. Morg swore again and swept a big, dark hand to his holster.

"Agh—agh!" cautioned Billy Bond, and covered him with a rifle. "Don't do nothin' foolish, Morg. Le's you an' me talk turkey."

"What's the meanin' o' this?"

Billy put down his rifle, raised head and shoulders above the rock, and began making a cigarette. He was watching Morg closely all the while, though; ready to duck if the fellow made another play to draw.

"I've homesteaded this here piece of land an' done me some fencin'," he explained.

"You've *what?*"

"How many dogies you got in yore herd, Morg?" Billy went on calmly.

Hesitation, and then: "About twenty-five hunnert, I reckon."

"Uh-huh; twenty-five hunnert; le's see now." Billy Bond squinted speculatively. "You fellas still owe my Aunt Delly twenty-six hunnert an' thirty dollars. Twenty-five hunnert head at a dollar an' a nickel a head would amount to twenty-six hunnert an' twenty-five dollars. I reckon that's close enough. Yeah, Morg, you fellas pay me a toll of a dollar five a head an' yore cows go through; otherwise they won't."

"I'll see you in hell first!"

"If you don't drive through this pass," Billy went on calmly, "you'll have to go either east or west for a long distance. Besides findin' practically no water, you'd lose about four days *and* yore contract. So which shall it be, Morg: a loss of ten dollars a head on the sale of yore beef, er a dollar five a head fer toll fees?"

"YOU can't keep us out. This here is a public road."

"It's no road a-tall, jest a pass. In my opinion, since I've homesteaded the land, I got a right to fence wherever I like. Course I may be wrong. We'll let the law decide if you like. You might even be able to git out a conjunction, er

whatever you call it, restrainin' me from restrainin' you; but that'd take time."

"Damn you, we'll blast you out!" Again Morg Jason's right hand swept to his gun. The weapon roared, but Billy Bond had ducked. The bullet whiffed above the block of stone on the ledge and whanged viciously against the cliff.

Billy Bond pushed the barrel of his rifle past a side of the rock, but he did not fire. He laughed softly when he saw that Morg Jason was pounding furiously back to join the Rafter J Bar outfit.

The riders bunched the cattle and then held a council of war.

"Le's go up there an' whup 'im out!" roared short, burly Zack Jason.

THE other men, too, were eager for gun action, particularly since all the odds were in their favor. And so two men stayed with the herd, while the other six went forward to do battle.

Smiling Billy Bond held his fire until they were within two hundred yards of him, then cut loose with his rifle. His first bullets were intended not to wound or kill, merely to halt the charge. One of them glanced from a rock, though, and sent a horse tumbling.

The riders halted, dismounted, went scurrying for shelter. They kept up their advance, darting from rock to rock. Billy was not in the least worried. He had changed his position to a sheltered crevice near the rim of the west wall of the gorge. From that position of vantage he might have picked off a hundred men before they could rush the pass and clear all the wire away.

At the foot of the cliffs lay a strip of entirely barren ground some fifty yards wide. The attackers halted at the edge of it and, from behind rocks, poured leaden hail against the great blade of stone which protected Billy Bond. He did not return their fire, but was content to save his ammunition and wait.

The firing ceased. A moment's portentous calm, and then the six men bobbed into sight and charged. *Crack!* One of them screamed and slapped a hand to a mangled ear. *Crack!* Another lost his hat. *Crack!* Dust spurted up right in front of a third. The bullet ricocheted and passed between his legs.

Each man in succession had wheeled back toward the rocks. The three Jasons, finding themselves deserted by their henchmen, also went pounding back to shelter.

"You danged coyotes," snarled Morg, leader of the outfit. "Run away an' left us cold. I've a good mind to gun you out."

"Shucks, boss," said the man with the bleeding ear. "We all acted wise. That young feller could uv drilled any of us plumb center at fifty yards if he'd wanted to. What chance we got blastin' 'im outa there? It'd take an army to do the job."

"He's right, fer the present at least," said Zack Jason. "I move we wait until night; then try to slip up on 'im."

It was agreed, and so the attackers withdrew and waited for nightfall.

CHAPTER V

Morg's Cunning Scheme

WHEN the sun went down and darkness came, Billy Bond became more watchful. About two hours after nightfall he saw shadows moving among the rocks. A minute later six men started crawling, Indian fashion, across the strip of barren ground. Billy hailed them, warned them.

Morg Jason barked an order. The

six men leaped to their feet and charged. A heavy blast brought them to an abrupt stop. "Dynamite!" one of them yelled, and again there was a rush for the rocky area.

Billy Bond called: "You see how it is. Even if you did git into the pass, I could blow you to high heaven. You're wastin' precious time. Bring up that toll money an' I'll let you through. While you're at it, bring my ridin' outfit, too. I ain't stuck on this'n I captured the other night."

Again there was a council of war. "We can't whup 'im out," Morg Jason confessed. "Like Tuck says, he could drill any of us, any time, if he wanted to."

"Well?" prompted the stupid, gorilla-faced Wirt.

"I hate to call on the law, but I'm burnin' the dust tonight to powwow with the sheriff. Come on, le's git back to camp."

IT was past noon of the following day when Morg Jason returned to the trail camp. "The doggoned sheriff wouldn't do a thing. Said he wasn't no lawyer, an' didn't know whuther er not the kid was actin' in his rights. Reckoned all we could do was take the case into court fer a decision. I went to the bank an' drawed out twenty-six hunnert an' twenty-five dollars."

"What?" snarled Zack. "You mean you aim to pay off to that young scoun'el?"

Morg's narrow black eyes glittered. "Remember how we paid off to his uncle ten year ago?" Silence for a moment, while he continued to grin, and then he added: "Well, we'll do the same with the kid."

He went on to explain. While in town he had seen two Mexicans, a man and a boy, driving two poor old nags hitched to a sun-dried wagon, halt in front of the coroner's office. They had gone inside and immediately returned with the coroner. The three had taken a body from the wagon and carried it indoors. Curious, thinking that perhaps somebody had been shot to death, Morg had gone to investigate.

The two Mexicans had told him about the old squatter's illness. After Billy had left, the squatter suddenly had taken a backset and had died.

Morg paused, licked his lips wolfishly, and then went on: "We'll pay off to Billy Bond, then ride to the ol' squatter's shack an' wait fer 'im."

A short time later Morg Jason left camp, carrying the payoff money and sitting astride Billy Bond's saddle. "Might be we won't have to go to the squatter's shack a-tall," he had told his two brothers before he left camp. "Maybe while I'm deliverin' this here money I'll be able to ketch the kid off guard fer a second an' drill 'im."

He rode to the edge of the open strip of ground and halted. The saddle creaked beneath his bulk as he rose in his stirrups and called, "Hey, Billy Bond!"

"Yeah?"

"You win. I've got the money an' yore outfit, an' I'm ready to lay 'em down."

"All right, come on up here an' leave 'em at the mouth of the pass. Put the money in the right-hand saddle pocket. Likewise, stick in a bill of sale for that hoss I took the other night. One of you *hombres* killed mine, so I'm keepin' this'n."

MORG advanced, got down, began uncinching. Covertly he watched the place where Billy was hiding, but he caught not a glimpse of the cowboy. "Ain'tcha comin' down to see if the amount's right?"

"Yep, when you leave. If it's okay you can come up with yore herd an' you'll find me gone. The ridin' equipment you want is over

there to yore left, back in that hole in the wall."

Morg Jason saw no chance to shoot the young cowboy whom he hated so intensely, and so he left the money, exchanged riding equipment, and rode away.

Billy Bond waited about thirty minutes; then he went down and counted the money. "I'm a little surprised they give in so easy," he thought, "but then I reckon they had sense enough to see it was the best thing to do."

A QUARTER of a mile away, the pass admitted to a small valley where there were grass and a spring of water. It was there that Billy Bond had left his mount hobbled. He took a final look to the south, made certain no riders were between him and the cow camp two miles away; then picked up his equipment and went clumping hurriedly along the pass.

A short time later he was on his way to the old squatter's shack—and a terrific gun-fight.

* * * * *

Billy Bond rode until dark, and then made camp in the open.

At sunup he was in the saddle and riding on. He did not crowd his mount; there was no occasion for hurry. The Jasons would be too busy shoving their herd toward the shipping point to scour the country for him. Besides, they probably would figure that he had hit a bee line for Mexico. It was twilight when he topped a rise and saw the lonely shack, down in the valley.

Through a soft lavender haze he rode, and came to the spring a hundred yards below the shack. He dismounted, squatted on his spurs, and scooped up some water with the brim of his Stetson. The horse sank its nose halfway to the eyes and drank heavily.

He swung back into the saddle and moved on. His grey eyes were squinted curiously now. "Strange, I don't see no sign of life about," he thought. "Wonder why there ain't no light. An' where's the Mex kid?"

He pulled to a stop. Where were the two rawboned nags, and the wagon? "I wonder if maybe the ol' gent got well enough to go into town fer supplies?" he thought.

He pulled up in front of the shack and called out. No answer; so he dismounted and stepped to the door, spurs clinking.

The door was lightly ajar. He pushed it open and went in. Darkness had settled swiftly; the little room was filled with shadow. He struck a match and went to a lamp that stood on a table. Perhaps somewhere he would find a note, explaining the nester's absence.

In a corner a pair of burlap curtains, hanging from a cord, formed a little triangular compartment which served as a clothes closet. As Billy Bond stooped and removed the lamp chimney, those curtains swayed apart. Three shadowy forms moved soundlessly into the open. Billy Bond was unaware of the sinister human presence until a deep voice that was vibrant with devilish triumph said:

"Freeze, kid! Don't move a muscle, except to strutch out yore arms an' lay yore han's palms down'ard on the table!"

CHAPTER VI

Into a Death Trap

BILLY BOND needed no command to freeze. The very sound of Morg Jason's voice in that moment turned the blood in his veins to ice. At the first word he had jerked his head to the right and shot a glance over his shoulder. His suddenly tensed left hand had crushed out the tiny flame of the match, but even there in the

gloom he could see that the three men had him covered.

For just an instant Billy Bond's hair roots seemed to crawl. He felt as does a man who stands on a death trap with the trigger ready to be sprung. Three giant fiends from hades, the Jason brothers appeared to him in that fleeting moment.

"Uh course you can go ahead an' make a play to draw if you like," came Wirt's nasal sneer.

From a viscid, half-frozen mass, Billy Bond's brain suddenly became a dynamo of flashing thoughts.

"YOU'VE got me," he confessed meekly. "I know when I hold losin' cards." He bent, stood the lamp chimney on the table, spread his hands palms-downward upon the oilcloth.

"We could kill you now," said Morg, the gloating in his hoarse voice swelling as he talked, "but that ud be plumb unsatisfyin'. A quick death ain't so good. We want to see you squirm an' beg. We're gonna tie you up by yore thumbs; then shoot you to death gradual." He laughed cruelly. For the moment the man was mad with revenge, lust and devilish triumph.

"Step up there, Wirt, an' take his hardware," twanged the human lump of iron, Zack. "Be careful, though, not to git between him an' our guns."

"With pleasure," exulted the blond gorilla. "I kin hardly wait until we git 'em strung. The ears are mine, fellers. I'm gonna see how few shots it'll take to cut 'em plumb away from his head."

When he had stooped and laid his hands on the oilcloth, Billy Bond had placed one of them at an end of the table so that two fingers overlapped the edge. His heart pounded as he waited while Wirt Jason took two steps—then he acted.

With a sudden fling he sent the table standing on end, and ducked behind it. Swift as the darting of fishes his two hands went to his guns and jerked them free. The lamp and the chimney crashed to the barren floor.

There in the gloom the three Jasons had not been able to see Billy Bond's move until the table had reared onto one end. Three tongues of flame licked into the darkness. The room shuddered to a terrific detonation. Lead smashed into the table while it was keeling over from the vertical, but none of the slugs caught Billy Bond. The lithe cowboy had not stopped behind the upended boarding, but had moved straight on as swiftly as a bounding panther. As his low-crouched form cleared an edge of the table, he fired both guns. One slug went chugging into the mighty chest of Wirt Jason. The other brought an oath from the chunky Zack.

Wirt began coughing and staggering in short, jerky steps, the while his Colt *boom, boom, boomed.* The fighting waddy was not even endangered by the shots, however, for Wirt's fire was wild, undirected.

THE table struck with a bang. Zack and Morg had fired but once each. Billy's leap had carried him to such a position that Wirt's sagging bulk was between himself and Morg. Zack had lowered the muzzle of his own weapon and slapped a hand to his bullet-gashed neck. As Wirt collapsed like a stricken elephant, both Morg and Zack cut loose again. So did Billy Bond.

The cowboy felt a blow on his right shoulder. It spun him off balance, hurled him to the floor. One of his guns thumped to the planking; but both his weapons had bellowed just a hair-second ahead of those in the hands of his two enemies. Even as the cowboy went tumbling backward, he heard Zack Jason gasp sharply; saw the chunky form

tense, shudder, then topple forward.

Billy Bond landed on his back, and his heels flew upward. He fired right between his bent knees. Morg fired, too, his gun sending fire spurting into the darkness. Billy Bond felt a slug wham against a side of his right spur. The bullet glanced off and drilled through a wall. The cowboy's backward tumble had saved him from being shot.

HE jerked himself to one elbow. The huge shadow that was Morg Jason was weaving, but the man fired once more. And once more Billy Bond's shot was first.

A bullet tore into the fleshy part of Billy's right chest. It scooted along close to the ribs and emerged at the armpit.

The blow had flung the waddy flat on his back again. He twisted over on his left side and thumbed back the hammer of his Colt for another shot, but it was not necessary. Morg Jason had gone down, his bulk smashing a flimsy chair. His big form now lay sprawled in the wreckage, legs and arms flung wide. He was very still. So were Wirt and Zack.

Billy Bond got to his feet. He was a little sick and dizzy from his two wounds. For a moment he stood crouched, gun held ready, watching the three forms on the floor, but they remained motionless. He examined them swiftly.

Wirt had an ugly wound in the chest, and the gorilla-like fellow was unconscious. Zack had a deep gash on the right side of his short, thick neck, and a bullet had entered just above his huge left shoulder. Morg, too, had been hit twice; once in the chest and once almost squarely through the knee-bone.

Out of the early night came a pattering of hoofs. Billy Bond swore under his breath and sprang to the door; but it was not more Rafter J Bar gunmen who were coming. He recognized the lanky, stoop-shouldered leader as Matt Purtel.

Billy Bond stepped out of the door as the sheriff and the three deputies pulled to a halt. "What happened," queried the sheriff.

In a very few words Billy Bond explained. The four riders dismounted and entered the house. The sheriff lighted a lantern which he found in a corner.

"Not until today did I learn that the two Mexicans had told Morg Jason you aimed to come here. I was talkin' with the coroner an' he happened to mention that Morg had seemed mighty inquisitive. Right away I jumped to the conclusion that the Jasons prob'ly would lay a trap fer you, so I got these three deppities an' we hit the trail."

Wirt Jason soon recovered consciousness. His ugly face twisted in an expression of intense hatred as he looked at Billy Bond, after learning that his two brothers had been seriously hurt, and then slowly the expression of ferocity died out.

"I reckon I'm whupped. I'm willin' to call it quits if you are, cowboy. I didn't have nothin' to do with that—with what happened to yore uncle ten year ago. It was Morg an' Zack. I was agin the idee."

BILLY BOND was grim and silent for a moment; then he smiled. "All right, we'll call it quits. I reckon all debts are paid. Your brothers'll likely agree when they fin'lly come to."

Two days later Smiling Billy Bond sent his Aunt Delly a post office money order, and a letter which said:

Here's the balance of the Jason money. I finally persuaded them to pay off in full.

As he forked his mount and loped away toward the west, there was a sparkle in his grey eyes, and he was humming a carefree tune.

Trouble Rider

The butt of Bucky Dorn's .45 clipped him smartly on the head

The Buckaroo Deputy Tackles Some Mean Hosses—And an Ornery Outlaw—in this Hell-for-Leather Yarn of the Mesas!

A Thrilling Bucky Dorn Story

By CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "The Buckaroo Deputy," "Bucky Dorn Rides Home," etc.

SHERIFF "OLD JOHN" TOBIN stepped out of the general store that was also the post office, and stomped briskly to the little adobe office next door that was also the jail. His leather-tanned face was serious as he read the letter he had just received, and in his preoccupation he collided with the young deputy who was just leaving the

office. The old sheriff reached out a lean hand and spun the deputy around as he snarled a question.

"Hyar! Whar you goin'?"

The blue eyes of Bucky Dorn expressed surprise.

"I got a rasslin' match on with that blue roan down in th' corral," he explained. "One fall to a finish, an' I can stomp him without saddle nor spurs!"

"Yuh ain't doin' no such," the old sheriff contradicted flatly. "Not with work a-goin', an' me too busy tuh scratch my haid. So you kin jess forgit about bein' a buckaroo deputy fer th' space of a day or so!"

"Now yuh take that blue roan," said the young deputy. "He ain't never been rode to a fall, an' I'm bettin' Red-Hawss Matthews a double sawbuck that I kin peel him with a hack!"

Sheriff Old John sighed regretfully.

"I'd like fer tuh see th' tussle," he said. "Yo're gittin' mighty cocky th' way yuh hang yore bridle up fer tuh use a hackamore. Fer another ten spot, th' roan could pile yuh up higher than th' Superstition mountains!"

"Took!" said Bucky Dorn quickly. "Yore bet is took an' I raise yuh half a month's pay tuh boot. Less us git on down there tuh th' ridin' pen!"

"It kin wait," said the sheriff firmly. "I done tole yuh thar's work a-goin'!"

"YOU do it," said Bucky Dorn. "I'm only yore depitty, an' I ain't rightly learned all th' ins an' outs of this yere sheriffin' business yet. Yuh cert'ny are a top-hand, Ole John!"

The claw-like right hand of the old officer slid down to the Colt on his right leg as he glared at the younger man.

"I got a good mind tuh pistol-whup yuh an' knock some sense in that rattle pan of yourn," he snarled. "I'll teach yuh some respect fer yore superiors!"

"Don't shoot," said Bucky Dorn softly. "I gives up an' steps back. Whuts th' bad news, Ole John?"

"This yere letter is from Sheriff Tate of Pimal County," said the sheriff. "He's holdin' Limpin' Turner over there fer us, an' you got tuh go an' git him!"

"LIMPIN' TURNER whut robbed th' stage last month?" The blue eyes of the young deputy twinkled as he mentioned the name of the robber. "He used tuh be right smart of a buckaroo," he added.

"Let that be a lesson tuh you," said the sheriff. "Turner used tuh be a fair masher ontil that big sorrel threw him fer a loss an' busted his laig, an' he's been limpin' ever since!"

"I could've rode that sorrel," said the deputy. "Turner calls him 'Trouble'!"

"Cain't yuh think of nuthin' else but ridin' buckers?" shouted the sheriff. "Yuh was a buckaroo when I took yuh fer my depitty, an' yuh hain't changed a bit. It's boots an' saddles fer you, my son. Get on over there tuh Pimal County an' fetch that robber back yere. Sheriff Tate 'll have th' papers all ready!"

"That bet's still on," said Bucky Dorn. "I'll ride th' blue roan as soon as I gits back!"

The old sheriff glared at him as he high-heeled it out to the little corral in the rear, and then the stern old eyes softened as the young deputy spoke quietly to the roan he was saddling. The big horse nudged the man who was adjusting the riding gear for the long trip, and then cocked his head sideways to listen to the crooning voice of the buckaroo deputy. The sheriff knew that no one else could touch the roan, but Bucky Dorn had a way with horses.

"He whispers to 'em," growled the

old sheriff. "Sometimes I think he casts a spell over 'em!"

The deputy lifted himself into the saddle and faced the sheriff.

"I'll be back in a day or two," he said carelessly. "Have th' money ready whut I'm goin' tuh win fer ridin' th' blue roan!"

BUCKY DORN faced the heavy-set man in the sheriff's office of Pimal County. It had been a long ride, and the range clothes of the deputy were heavy with alkali dust. But the blue eyes were smiling under the droopy brim of his Stetson.

"Sheriff Tate?" he asked. "I'm Bucky Dorn from Cochise County. Sheriff Ole John Tobin sent me over tuh git that gent whut is known as Limpin' Turner. Said you'd have th' papers all ready!"

"So yo're th' buckaroo depitty," said the stout sheriff, "I've heard tell of you, an' there's a job of ridin' ahead. This yere Limpin' Turner broke jail last night an' hit out fer th' Rincons!"

"Yuh mean he headed fer th' mountains?" asked Bucky quickly. "An' yuh sent a posse after him?"

Sheriff Tate shook his head.

"I knew you was comin'," he said quietly. "A posse is no good in them hills, son, an' from whut I've heard of you, I figgered yuh could mebbe pick him up on yore lonesome. A posse makes too much noise an' he'd jess hide out in th' lavas till they got tired an' quit. Seein' jess one man, I figger he won't bother to make a run fer it!"

"Where'd he git a hawss?" asked the deputy. "He must have rode away."

"He's ridin' Trouble," explained the sheriff. "That big sorrel whut broke his leg three-four year ago. Stole him right out of the livery barn when he broke jail. Yuh see, Bucky, they couldn't no one else git within ten feet of that sorrel hawss, but he follers Turner aroun' like a li'l dog!"

"I could ride that Trouble hawss," said the deputy. "I've allus wanted tuh throw a laig over his kak!"

"Yuh got trouble enough on yore hands catchin' this robber," said Sheriff Tate. "Onless I'm mistook, he'll head straight fer Buckskin Mesa where he kin make a run fer th' badlands if things git too hot. Yuh know anything about that country?"

Bucky Dorn nodded.

"I've hunted it," he said thoughtfully. "Lots of broom-tails over there in that mesa country!"

"'Pears like yore mind don't run tuh nuthin' much but buckin' hawsses," said Sheriff Tate. "Well, son, here's th' papers if yuh happens tuh pick up yore man. Yo're shore enough ridin' trouble without doin' any fancy peelin'. Slip up there an git Limpin' Turner, an' jess remember that th' gent is greased double lightin' with a six-gun!"

"Thanks," said the deputy. "I'll start back as soon as my hawss has finished his grain. It's too bad Turner made a getaway, but as you an' Sheriff Ole John said, it's up tuh me tuh ride trouble!"

Sheriff Tate snorted.

"Ole John was right," he growled. "He should've let yuh stay a buckaroo. If yuh went tuh sleep some night an' had a nightmare, th' chances are yuh'd try tuh ride her!"

"I'd do it bareback," grinned Bucky Dorn. "So long, Sheriff!"

THE young deputy made a dry camp that night in the foothills of the Rincon Mountains. The roan was picketed back in a little draw where he would be ready for instant use, and Bucky Dorn eased his back against the saddle as he lifted his eyes and scanned the rugged hills above.

"It means twenty years in th' pen fer Limpin', if he's took," he mut-

tered. "Which means that he's goin' tuh be rough, tough, an' nasty!"

He poured and rolled a brown paper quirly with expert fingers, and then smiled as he sent a cloud of blue smoke over his head.

"I'm ridin' trouble, they said!" He was still grinning as he pillowed his head on the saddle and pulled the Navajo blanket over his shoulders.

HOW long he had slept he had no way of telling, but now he was on his feet with a startled leap as the loud snort of a horse broke through his slumber. Sound sleep one minute; on his feet with a .45 in his hand the next. Thudding hoofs made him wheel toward the little draw where the roan had been picketed, and the heavy gun in his hand came up as he saw the roan racing madly up the trail—with a man clinging desperately to his back.

Down came the gun just as his finger was about to tighten around the touchy trigger, and Bucky Dorn groaned with disappointment.

"I'd hit th' roan shore as sin," he muttered. "But how in time that gent got aboard him is beyond me!"

Pulling on his high-heeled boots, the deputy hastened up the trail after the man who had stolen the horse right from under his nose. The moon was just peeping over the rimrock above to make the trail as light as day—and then Bucky Dorn stopped in amazement as he came to a little shelf that looked down into a clearing. The gun hung forgotten by his side as he watched the contest between man and horse, and a growl of admiration rose in his throat for the rider who was sticking to that bucking tornado like a burr.

"It's Limpin' Turner shore as sin! Now whut in time does he want with th' roan?"

The man was taller than himself by a good four inches, and heavier by thirty pounds, and Bucky Dorn caught his breath sharply as he noticed that he was riding the roan without a saddle. The long legs were gripping the heaving sides of the sweating horse like steel bands, and the deputy knew that the only reason the rider maintained his seat was because of the Spanish curb-bit he could see glinting in the moonlight.

The deputy ground his teeth in futile rage as he saw the roan fighting to get his head down. The rider also knew what would happen if the roan succeeded, and he held that hammer-head up with a grip that brought a bloody foam from between the gaping jaws. The roan was crow-hopping now as he tried vainly to get the curb between his strong teeth. Every time he started a buck, the rider would rein him up with a jerk that threatened to throw them both backwards.

The hands of Bucky Dorn were clenched tightly as he watched the uneven struggle. He thrust the gun back into the holster as the grip hurt his palm, and then he realized that the perspiration was pouring from him in streams.

THE roan was nearing the edge of the clearing now as he crow-hopped across the little mesa. He suddenly seemed to realize the closeness of the trees at the same time that his rider did. Turner threw his weight sharply to the left to swing the roan around, but with a scream of mingled rage and pain, the big animal threw himself forward as he turned to answer the cruel Spanish bit.

A hoarse yell came from the throat of the rider as he realized what the roan was doing, and then he hastily pulled his crippled leg up to save it from being mashed against the trunk of the scrub pine against which the roan had thrown himself.

In that split second of surprise, the roan seized the bit between his great teeth as he wheeled sharply to the

right. Down came his head between the forelegs, and then his back snapped like a steel spring. Limpin' Turner sailed gracefully through the air for a full twenty feet before he landed on his shoulders with a thud that drove the breath from his body.

THE maddened roan rushed forward with snapping teeth and striking forefeet, and then he stopped suddenly as a thin whistle split the air from above. His head came up as he whinnied, and a moment later Bucky Dorn was scrambling down the trail and across the little clearing. Ignoring the fallen man, he unfastened the throat latch and threw the Spanish curb to the ground. The roan worked his mouth to rid it of the foamy blood and then snorted as his master made a wild leap toward the man on the ground.

Limpin' Turner was sitting up, his right hand slipping down to the low-thonged gun on his right thigh. He moved like a man in a daze, and then the barrel of Bucky Dorn's .45 clipped him smartly on the head. The gun slipped from Turner's fingers as he slumped again to the ground, and there was a sharp metallic click as the deputy bent over his prisoner.

Bucky Dorn poured a brownie and hunkered down on his haunches to await the return to consciousness. As Turner moved his head slowly, the deputy ground the cigarette under his boot and grinned. The prisoner sat up groggily and then swore as he felt the manacles on his wrists.

"A swell depitty you are," he sneered, "tuh take a man when he's knocked cold!"

"Shore," agreed Bucky. "When a gent can't ride a hawss whut he has stole, he don't deserve no consideration whatever. 'Specially when he has tuh use a curb bit!"

"I didn't have no saddle," snarled Turner.

"Yuh would have used th' curb iffen yuh had been sittin' yore kak," said Bucky. "Whuts th' idea takin' th' roan?"

"My hawss went lame on me," growled Turner. "I seen yuh comin' yest'day afternoon, an' then Trouble stepped on a pebble an' threw a joint!"

"'At's too bad," said Bucky. "I figgered on ridin' Trouble after I had taken yuh in. Now I guess I'll have tuh wait!"

"Yuh never saw th' day yuh could stay on that sorrel's hurricane deck," sneered the robber. "They ain't a man outside myself kin ride him!"

"I forgot fer a minute that yuh was a prisoner," said the deputy. "I was jess goin' tuh make yuh a li'l bet that I could ride Trouble straight up, an' I wouldn't use no bit a-tall, much less a curb!"

Turner sneered nastily.

"Less git on up there to th' big mesa," he said. "We're goin' tuh have tuh stay here several days till th' sorrel heals up."

"Guess again," said the deputy. "We starts back fer Cochise in the mornin' if one of us has tuh walk, an' it won't be me!"

HIS eyes widened as they came to the broad table land known as Buckskin Mesa. The big sorrel was picketed under a fringe of trees, and after studying the animal for a moment, the eyes of the deputy were cast on the ground. Then he walked toward the sorrel, talking softly.

"Stand away!" bellowed Turner. "He'll rear up an' knock yore brains out!"

Bucky Dorn turned and regarded the prisoner coldly. Then he stooped over a saddle and took a short coil of rope from a latigo string. Turner protested when he cast a loop around his wrists, but a moment later he was sitting with his back to a tree, his hands snubbed against the bark.

"Hush yore yap," said Bucky Dorn

shortly. "That hawss hasn't thrown a stifle no more than I have. A swell buckaroo you are!"

Talking in that same soothing monotone, he walked straight up to the wondering sorrel. Stooping quickly he picked up the left front hoof, and then the curved blade of his knife dislodged a jagged stone from the frog of the shod hoof. Letting the hoof slip to the ground, he stepped back and walked away from the big sorrel before the animal recovered from his surprise.

"Blast it!" swore Turner. "All he had was a rock in th' frawg of his hoof, an' I thought he had thrown a joint!"

"Look at them tracks," said the deputy. "Yuh kin see th' stone plain enough ever' place th' hawss set down his left front. An'nen yuh come sneakin' down tuh steal my hawss!"

BUCKY DORN shook his prisoner roughly as the first light of dawn showed above the towering crest of Rincon Peak. Limpin' Turner groaned as his eyes slowly opened, and then he cursed when his manacled wrists kept him from stretching his cramped arms above his head. His little eyes could see his six-gun sticking in the cartridge belt of the deputy, but Bucky Dorn grinned as he drew his own gun and stepped forward.

"Hold out yore hands!" he snapped. "Yuh might as well saddle yore own hawss, an' don't try no funny business or I'll wing yuh shore as sin!"

He covered the larger man as he hobbled over and picked the heavy saddle from the carpet of pine needles. He watched admiringly as the big sorrel nudged his master, and when the saddle was in place, he motioned the prisoner back.

"Hold out them wrists," he said. "Yuh don't need that Spanish curb on him t'day!"

Limpin' Turner watched closely as the deputy reached out for the handcuffs which dangled on his left wrist. Bucky Dorn smiled softly as he thrust the barrel of his six-gun squarely against the stomach of his prisoner, and then he clicked the bracelet around the right wrist.

"Did yuh ever see a gent whut was shot in th' belly?" he asked pleasantly. "Jess yuh try tuh do whut yuh was thinkin', an' yo're goin' tuh git some first-hand information. Now git back there to that tree whilst I throws some grub together!"

He looked up from the sizzling bacon as Limpin' Turner suddenly began to chuckle. He tried vainly to see what had amused the prisoner, but Turner only chuckled louder.

"Whut's so funny?" Bucky Dorn asked irritably.

"Yuh made a crack about ridin' Trouble," grinned the prisoner. "An' yo're allus bettin' on yore ability!"

"I kin ride him, an' I will," said the deputy calmly. "But as Sheriff Ole John would say: 'There's work a-goin'!' "

"Yuh can't ride him nohow," sneered Turner. "Tell yuh whut I'll do. I'll bet yuh my freedom agin' th' hawss hisself, an' th' money I stole from th' stage. Nobody but me knows where it's cached. If yuh win, yuh gits th' hawss an' th' money, an' I gits twenty years. If I wins, all I asks is twenty-four hours' start aboard Trouble!"

"Shut yore yap!" snapped the deputy. "That there's bribery, an' kin be used agin yuh!"

"A swell buckaroo yuh are," sneered Turner. "An' a pore sport tuh boot!"

BUCKY DORN glowered in silence as he heaped a plate with bacon and beans and carried it to the prisoner. Turner watched him carefully as he frowned over his food, and every so often the crippled robber would chuckle afresh.

"She's a sportin' proposition," he said softly. "An' even if I wins, yuh got a chance tuh catch me again!"

Bucky Dorn jumped quickly to his feet, his thin face set and determined. He snatched the pigging string from the ground, and leaning over he again bound the hands of the prisoner against the rough bark of the pine. Turner watched him silently, a look of anticipation on his stubbled face.

"She's a bet, if I gits broke by Sheriff Ole John," snapped the deputy. "I'm ridin' Trouble, an' I'm goin' tuh win. Where's that *dinero* yuh took from th' stage?"

"I'll tell yuh after yuh ride th' sorrel," sneered Turner. "It's hid out on th' way back tuh Cochise, an' I ain't never broke my word yet, or welched on a bet!"

Bucky Dorn turned away suddenly and started for the sorrel, who was standing under the fringe of jack pines where Turner had tied him. For a moment the big man watched, and then he shouted a warning.

"Yuh better use th' curb!"

Without answering the deputy walked forward. The sorrel watched him from wary eyes, and then commenced clamping his teeth in expectation of the cruel bit. A heavy hackamore held him to the tree, and Bucky Dorn side-stepped and vaulted into the saddle. Before the startled animal could move, his fingers had pulled the slip noose loose as his boots snugged down in the open stirrups. His left hand drew the rope tight, and his lips tightened in a straight line of grimness as the sorrel came to life like a belated explosion.

BUCKING with a weaving jerk, the big red horse came to the center of the mesa before he paused, and then he bunched his four hoofs together to pivot like a top. Out of that dizzy gyration he leaped high into the air to come down on stiffened legs that snapped the back of Bucky Dorn and jolted his brain like a hammer blow.

The buckaroo deputy snorted through his nose to clear his fogged senses just as a prizefighter would do, and then he deliberately let the sorrel have his head. Sun-fishing across the uneven ground, the animal paused only long enough to swap ends with unbelievable speed.

Limpin' Turner was straining against his bonds as the sweat streamed down his heavy face. His gruff voice was shouting encouragement and advice to the pitching horse, and he roared with rage when Bucky Dorn leaned down to thumb the neck of the tiring animal. Up came the sorrel until it seemed that he would topple over backward, and then the thumb of Bucky Dorn found the arched neck again. Down crashed the front hoofs as the head was flung low in unison with the back which arched suddenly like a bison. And the buckaroo deputy laughed happily and threw his Stetson into the air.

SUDDENLY the sorrel stopped pitching, and as the low voice of his rider came to him, he swung his hanging head around to gaze with wondering eyes. Bucky Dorn swung quickly from the saddle, and then vaulted lightly back again, and still the exhausted animal stood quiet with drooping head. Again the deputy swung slowly down, but this time he stroked the sweat-roughened neck with gentle hands as he talked soothingly.

"He's yore hawss," growled the hoarse voice of Limpin' Turner. "If I had my two hands loose, I'd gun him shore as sin!"

"Yuh wouldn't if yuh had jess two minutes tuh sit there an' think about it fust off," answered the deputy. "Where'd yuh say that cash was?"

"We'll git it on th' way in," growled the robber. "I ain't never seen nobody like yuh with hawsses!"

"Reckon you'll have tuh ride

Trouble back," said Bucky Dorn regretfully. "Seein' as th' roan won't have no part of yuh!"

SHERIFF TOBIN came out of the office as the buckaroo deputy tied the two horses to the hitch-rack. He grinned as Limpin' Turner swung down from the saddle, his manacled hands held awkwardly before him, and then his squinting eyes regarded the sorrel's head.

"Whar's yore bridle?" he asked.

The robber swore feelingly.

"That buckaroo depitty of yourn tuck it off," he growled. "Then he rode Trouble with jess that hack there. So I lost th' bet!"

"Whut bet?" the old sheriff regarded his deputy suspiciously.

"I bet him th' sorrel an' th' money I took from th' stage, agin a day's start fer a gitaway," growled the robber. "He won hands down!"

"He did, eh?" Sheriff Old John scowled at the young deputy, who was gazing into distance. "How about th' oath yuh took when yuh entered office?"

"She was a hunch," admitted Bucky Dorn. "Fust off, yuh tells me that I'm ridin' trouble. Then when Sheriff Tate over in Pimal County let's Limpin' break jail, he tells me th' same thing. Then when this jasper starts tuh taunt me about ridin' Trouble, I jess up an' done hit!"

"Hmm!" grunted the sheriff. "Seein' as yuh done it, there hain't much more tuh be said. Let's us git on down thar tuh that ridin' pen. I'll larn yuh somethin'!"

"Fer how much?" asked the deputy. "That is, if yuh means th' punishment is fer me tuh top off that blue roan!"

"Yuh've been in th' saddle for a mite better than fifty miles," grinned Sheriff Tobin. "Fer once I'm goin' tuh make yuh good an' sick of bein' uh buckaroo depitty. I'm callin' th' bet yuh made yesterday. Yuh said yuh'd ride the blue roan as soon as yuh got back!"

"I want tuh see this," said Turner. "I'm goin' tuh be inside a long spell, Sheriff!"

"Come on," growled the sheriff, "seein' as yo're handcuffed an' all wore out. Yore jess about tuh witness my wuthless depitty breakin' his fool neck!"

The animal's ugly head was snubbed low to the ground against the snubbing post, as Red-hawss Matthews helped Bucky Dorn throw the riding gear on the struggling roan. Bigger than the sorrel by a full hand, the outlaw squealed with terror and rage as they blindfolded his eyes. Even the hardened old sheriff gasped when the deputy fastened the throat latch of the double hackamore.

"Git yore bridle on that killer!" he shouted. "Yuh triple-plated idiot!"

For answer Bucky Dorn vaulted lightly in the saddle and jerked the blind loose as Red cast off the snubbing rope. For a minute the spectators could see nothing except dust as the blue roan threw his feet with the speed of boxing gloves. When the dust settled somewhat, they could see the slim deputy riding straight up, his droopy Stetson in his right hand. His left held the single rope attached to the hackamore.

AND then the onlookers settled back on the top rails of the corral as the buckaroo deputy matched his skill against the bucking outlaw.

"Scratch him, Bucky!" Limpin' Turner yelled. "Ride him, cowboy!"

The sheriff growled with disgust.

"He should've stayed a top-hand buckaroo," he snapped. "There goes ten bucks on top of half a month's pay, an' jess after him doin' fifty-odd miles in th' saddle!"

"An' he rode Trouble afore we started," said Limpin' Turner. "It was wuth jail jess tuh see that buckaroo depitty ride Trouble!"

Sleep, Cowboy, Sleep

A Hooker Brothers Story

As he swings a haymaker at me, I dodges an' it lands on Doc Scoggins

One-Ton Benson Is Plumb Hornswoggled by "Waking-Sickness" in this Uproarious Yarn of Strange Misadventures in the Cowlands!

By RAY NAFZIGER

Author of "The Wild Man of Canyon Lobo," etc.

THERE'S always one thing you can depend on me—Johnny Hooker — to do, which is to ride up to pull out a pal what's bogged in a mudhole. That's where I'm different from my li'l brother Stevie, who pardners it with me on this Home for Old Lady Cows in Canyon Lobo, otherwise knowed as Hooker Bros. ranch.

Stevie, the li'l coot, he's cold-blooded as a froze raatlersnake. But me, Johnny Hooker, I got a heart bigger'n Cochise County, Arizona,

and a friend can depend on me to the last dollar and the last swig in the bottle.

Like when our big, fat hand, "One-Ton" Benson got afflicted by this turrible wakin' sickness. I heard of plenty cowboys effected by sleepin' sickness to the point where yuh let 'em ride around a point outa sight, and then jist natcherally falls off their horse an' takes a snooze. But this here Percheron cowboy of a One-Ton, he's efflicted by a sickness which won't let him go to sleep.

AND when that wakin' sickness rides up an' drops a loop over him, who is it that sticks by his side? Not to make no brags I can't prove, it's none other than me, Johnny Hooker.

It's late one night when we discover this here disease has fastened One-Ton with its awful and mebbe plumb fatal grip. We're all snoozin' in our bunks, grabbin' us off a few yards o' shut-eye preparin' next day to chase down some big wild steers that hide out over in our Squaw Crick pasture. That Squaw Crick is rough country, lemme tell yuh, the kind that rares up an' falls over backwards, and them dang steers races over it all same like Liza and her pack of bloodhounds crossin' the ice.

Me and Stevie, figgerin' we needs a good sleep to ride that country, has turned in early, along with our cook and roustabout, Old George, and that señorita-chasin' Pablo cow hand o' ours, and o' course, One-Ton.

It's well past midnight when I'm woke up by a noise in the kitchen, a sorta clunka-wunk-chunk noise which sounds like a load of oil well casin's bein' drove over a corrugated road. It's woke the other boys, too. Across from me, my li'l brother Stevie bumps his head agin a bunk top; and beyond, Pablo is rustlin' around on his corn-shuck mattress. While old George he's bellerin':

"Hey, you big lump o' tallow; cut out that sleep walkin'!"

Through the kitchen door we see One-Ton Benson who's dressed and lit a lamp. He's a-pacin' back and forth from the stove to the wall, all same as a caged tiger kitty. It's his big spurs what's makin' that clunkin' noise.

Stevie grabs hisself a boot to sorta discourage that there performance, but I grabs his arm.

"Hold on," I says. "One-Ton looks sick. Somethin's wrong with him."

One-Ton he stops and stares at us, and his hair is all tossed around wild, while his face is screwed up into the worst expression of human sufferin' I ever saw. He looks just like he's havin' one leg sawed off by a sorta dull saw.

"WHAT'S got into you, hey?" bawls my li'l brother Stevie.

"I can't sleep, boys," says One-Ton mournful. "I kept it from yuh, but this is the third night I ain't had nary a wink of sleep."

"So yuh can't sleep?" sneers my li'l brother Stevie, unfeelin' as a dead turtle. "Is that any reason for clankin' them steel paddle-wheels on your heels so we can't sleep either?"

"I can't sleep," repeats One-Ton. And that big cowboy, he sets down and berries his face in a pair of paws the size of saddle blankets.

"It's been comin' on me," he groans. "I'm jest all jumpy. A plumb nervous wreck. Boys, I'll go crazy if this keeps up. A man has got to have his sleep."

And he springs to his feet again and starts his clunka-chunk-whunkin' back and forth over the kitchen floor. My li'l brother Stevie and Pablo and old George, you never saw no such heartless outfit. They yells at him to go down to the corral to do his night walkin', and they perceeds to wrop their blankets around their heads to go to sleep agin. But me, Johnny

Hooker, with a heart big as all outdoors, I climbs outa my bunk, and I goes into the kitchen.

"What yuh need, One-Ton," I says, "is a nice hot toddy. There ain't nothin' like a good hot toddy to put a man asleep, and it's lucky that Stevie brung a bottle of old rye last night, and it's still luckier I saw him when he was hidin' it out."

"YOU let that likker alone!" bawls my li'l brother, which the only excuse he's got for a head a-tall is they had to have something to pin his ears on. "I got that for a high-class party next Sattidy night."

"Yessir, a nice hot toddy," I says, pullin' the bottle outa the old boot where Stevie had it cached.

One-Ton, he stops his pacin' and he eyes the bottle, and the hopeful expression on that big fella's face makes me feel good right down to the toes.

"You're a real pal, Johnny," he says. "A real pal."

"A pal on my likker, blame it!" bellers Stevie. "Didn't I tell yuh to leave that likker alone, hey?" and he springs into the room.

Can I help it if as we're wrastlin' over that likker he steps a bare foot down on One-Ton's spurs? He lets out a screech like a dyin' bobcat and it takes me and One-Ton both to hold him from committin' fratricide on me with the bootjack.

"Lemme go, yuh yeller bums!" yowls Stevie. "Johnny's too yeller to fight me alone and One-Ton's so yeller he's playin' sick so he won't have to ride them rims up on Squaw Crick."

"I s'pose if he had been bit by a snake, you would of refused to give him your whiskey?" I says.

"I woulda been able to see either the bite or the snake in that case," says Stevie who's enough to sour you on the human race.

We slings Stevie into the bunkroom and locks the door and settles down to that bottle of rye, me decidin' to stay up to keep my old pal One-Ton company, anyway so long as Stevie's whiskey holds out.

"It ain't no use, Johnny," he says, after we has mixed us a few rounds of toddies. "Nothin' don't do me no good. It's something inside me that won't let me sleep."

"One-Ton," I says, "I ain't a feller to make no light promises. Yuh can depend on your old pal, Johnny Hooker, to cure yuh of this here turrible wakin' sickness."

So I insists we have a few more drinks, and we plays a li'l two-hand stud, just tryin' to cheer up poor One-Ton. We finishes Stevie's likker and we find a li'l moonshine that old George put away in case of rhoomatism, and about the time we end that it's mornin' and Stevie and old George and Pablo they gits up and has breakfast. Pablo he brings up our remuda, and Stevie he buckles on his spurs.

"C'MON," he snarls. "Le's be ridin', now that yuh two has finished all the whiskey on the ranch on a cooked-up excuse."

"How c'n yuh ask a feller in One-Ton's condishun to ride after steers?" I inquires. "Ain't yuh got no heart nor nothin'? Look at him; tremblin' like a quakin' asp leaf. Not a wink of sleep in three nights and four days. If something ain't done for him they'll be pattin' him in the face with a spade and yowlin' the 'Dyin' Cowboy' over his grave."

"A good long ride in the high air of that Squaw Crick country will fix him up," says Stevie. "After a day ridin' them rims, it'll take dynamite to wake him up next mornin'."

"It'd only be torture," I states. "Nossir, I'm takin' One-Ton to see Doc Scroggins at Sunset, to git him fixed up. You boys go ahead and ride them rims. Borry a coupla cow

huntin' dogs to take our place."

Yuh never heard no such howl as comes outa Stevie and old George and Pablo. They paws dirt and bellers, all over a human act of me savin' a old pal from mebbe fadin' away to a shadder. Me, I git tired of lissenin' to such bellyachers, so I shoves poor One-Ton into our old car, and we rambles outa there. Yuh'd think I was burnin' down a orphan asylum instead of helpin' out a pal. As if me, I would slip outa a job, jist account it's hard and dangerous.

I BURNS up the road to Sunset and we find Doc Scroggins is out with a Mexican family, so we says we will wait for him. As there is few places to wait we goes into a saloon, natcherally, and there the bartender greets us, and we tell him about this here turrible wakin' sickness of One-Ton's. That seems to call for a drink on the house, and some other fellas lissenin' in, they calls for a few rounds o' drinks, and all them drinks calls for another on the house.

From that saloon we wanders into another one, and the boys in this place also is sympathetic when I tells the story about my old pal, One-Ton, bein' unable to sleep, and they set up the drinks. I puts forth the idea, and ever'body agrees, if we can git enough alcohol into One-Ton's system, it'll cure him.

The more whiskey One-Ton swallers, the more awake he gits. He says there's something inside him jabbin' pitchforks into him whenever he shuts his eyes.

I guess anybody else but a reg'lar pal like me would of quit tryin' to keep pace with him on them drinks, but me, I'm right alongside watchin' out to ketch him the moment he goes to sleep. Only he don't do it, and it simply wrings my heart to see him sufferin', and if not for drinkin' steady I probaly couldn't of stood up under the strain.

Along toward evenin' Doc Scroggins gits back to town, he walks into a saloon and announces he has brung a pair of Mexican twins into the world which is good for a couple rounds of drinks on the house, and then doc he looks at One-Ton. He thumps his chest and he hammers his stomick, and he examines his pasterns and hocks, and looks down his throat, and he rolls up his eyelids.

Then he says it's the strangest case he ever seen in his life, and if that ain't good for a round of drinks on the house, what is?

The whole town is interested by this time, and more men drifts in, Sheriff Andy Causey among 'em, and he sets 'em up for One-Ton and Doc Scroggins and the rest of us.

Doc Scroggins he says it's a motto of his when he's in doubt to recommend whiskey, and a lot of it. Anybody can see that doc is on the right track: either that wakin' sickness of One-Ton's has got to give in, or the whiskey in Sunset will give out. Doc Scroggins he stays right with his patient, drinkin' along, first in one saloon, then another, and a smarter, better-hearted doctor than Doc Scroggins you'd ride a heck of a long ways to see.

WE'RE standin' by a bar when there's a uproar, and in busts my weak-headed li'l brother Stevie and with him our two hands, Pablo and old George. Stevie, he walks over and he shakes his fist under the noses of me and One-Ton.

"You pair of drunk bums!" he yells. "Come outa this. We need a coupla fellers with weak heads and strong backs like you two to help ride for them blasted steers. We been out there all day chasin' them critters, and we didn't git a one. You slackers, come on home, you hear me, hey?"

"How can you call us slackers?" I says, "when I'm only here helpin'

my old pal One-Ton recover from his turrible effliction? What he needs is medical attention."

"He's ri'," says Doc Scroggins, who's been keepin' right along in this whiskey cure we're experimentin' with. "This here is a case of the feared wakin' sickness, but we'll git him ashleep if we hash to shtay here all night, whoopie!"

"A LOT of drunk bums!" bawls my bro. Stevie. "Are you comin' home or ain't you, hey? He ain't got no wakin' sickness or any other kind. It's jist a stall of you two to git outta ridin' that tough country up on Squaw Crick. Are you comin' home or ain't you, hey? We ain't got no time for this here boozin'."

And he swings a haymaker at me and I dodge it and it lands on Doc Scroggins, and doc goes down, sliding along against the bar.

So that makes me mad, and I swings one right back at Stevie and it hits the bartender who's leanin' over the bar, watchin' Doc Scroggins.

Then somebody else swings on somebody else and I git it on the jaw. After that there's a free fer all fight, includin' all what's been takin' part in this great experiment to git One-Ton asleep, and hates to be interrupted by a gang of rowdies like my brother Stevie and old George and Pablo.

We ain't got started real good, when in busts Sheriff Andy Causey and the Sunset marshal and a depity sheriff, and what do they do but load up a coupla cars with me and Stevie and One-Ton and old George and Pablo and Doc Scroggins and a pair o' bartenders and some of the other boys, unloadin' us at the county lockup. They turns us loose in a cell and there we all stays until a rider comes in to report another Mexican baby is expected into the world and Doc Scroggins is let out, while the rest of us is left in there on the inside lookin' out.

It's lucky somebody thought to bring along a jug, and we pass that around, and pretty soon I git a smart idee, namely and to wit, what does they do when they want to git a restless babe to sleep? Never havin' none, I wouldn't know for sure, but I have heard that somebody, usually the papa, lugs him up and down, and sings soothin' songs to him. One-Ton is too big for anybody to lug up and down, but we can sing a soothin' lullaby or two.

We should of thought of that singin' One-Ton to sleep idee before, but it's never too late to start. We all sails in with this here new song "The Last Roundup," and then when that don't work we sails into "The Man on the Flyin' Trapeze." Instead of puttin' One-Ton to sleep as we hoped, he busts out singin' with us. But we ain't ones to be discouraged; we keep on singin', slidin' into "Little Joe, the Wrangler," and "Home on the Range." We're jis swingin' into "Old Paint," when the sheriff comes gallopin' up.

"CUT out that bellerin'!" he yells.

"Why, Sheriff," I pertests, "we was jist singin' a few lullabies hereto git One-Ton to sleep."

"You've woke up everybody over there in the hotel acrost the street, and now you've woke up the whole blame town. Git outa here, and take out that feller that can't sleep and bury him somewheres. No wonder he can't sleep—associatin' with a gang of fellas like you. Nobody else could. Now git out before I chase you out."

"You don't have to tell me more'n oncet," says my li'l brother Stevie. "Me and Pablo and old George is headin' outa here."

Well, me, Johnny Hooker, I'm allus willin' to lissen to reason, although you'd think people would be

tickled to lissen to good singin'. The saloons has all closed anyway, so why waste time in a one-horse town like Sunset?

"I GUESS mebbe we better call it a night an' go home an' go to sleep," I states.

"How about me?" demands One-Ton. "You boys will go home to sleep, but me, if I don't git to sleep t'night, I'll go plumb crazy."

I had sorta forgot about One-Ton, what with this and that.

"You can trust in me, One-Ton," I says, as some neighbor cowboys piles in our car with us. "I'm goin' to git you to sleep before this night's over if I got to knock yuh out with a monkey wrench."

At that moment we bounces over some railroad tracks down by the loadin' pens, and I hear a *blat*. And right there I git another idee.

"Hold on!" I says, pushin' on the brakes. "Here's somethin' that's sure to cure One-Ton of this wakin' sickness. What cure do folks all recommend for a feller what can't go to sleep? Why, countin' sheep. And right over there in the pens is old man Caraway's band of yearlin' Navajos that he's took off the lava beds south of town to ship to his big ranch."

"I ain't a-goin' to count no dang sheep," says One-Ton. "I'm a cowboy and I refuse to have anything to do with sheep."

"Yuh got to swaller yore pride for oncet, One-Ton," I says. "If anything would put a cowboy to sleep, it oughta be the countin' of sheep."

"That's right," says Dink Edwards. "You git down, One-Ton, and stand by one of the gates, while we shove that bunch of blatters on past yuh. In no time a-tall you'll be asleep, and if the countin' don't put yuh to sleep, the smell of them woollies will."

One-Ton he agrees finally, and we climb over the top of them yards, and we swing a gate part way open, and stick up a pole to make them sheep jump it as they do in countin' woollies. We gather a pile of small rocks for One-Ton, and every time he gits up to 100 sheep he will throw a rock into a pile.

I s'pose some folks would o' thought we was drunk, and out for a time, but here we are with only one thought: the curin' of a comrade's deadly illness. As for old man Caraway, he ought to be glad to loan us his sheep for the benefit of a sufferin' cowboy, and if he wouldn't be willin' to, he's off asleep somewhere so he won't know anything about it.

SO we whoops at them sheep, and crowds 'em up to the gate, and One-Ton he counts 'em as they pass by in the moonlight, throwin' a rock into the pile whenever he gits a hundred sheep.

After about five hundred sheep, he says he's thirsty, so we all stop for a drink from a jug we had luckily put in the car for emergencies, and then One-Ton goes ahead agin, while we shoves 'em by. Every five rocks we holds up the sheep and we helps ourselves from that jug.

Well, we never knowed old man Caraway had so consarned many sheep. Two hours steady we drive, and we whoop and holler and shove them sheep past One-Ton, and ever' so often we got to find him more rocks to throw in the pile.

And the more One-Ton counts, the more wider awake he seems to git, until he's standin' there, yellin' loud for more sheep.

We finally is wore out and stops to count the rocks. There's forty-seven rocks which means as near as we can figger it around 4700 sheep, and there ain't that many sheep in this whole country. While behind us seems to be jist about as many sheep as we started with. Lookin' around

I finds that all the gates in the stock pen is open and that the dumb sheep has been follerin' each other around and around, and what we been doin' is countin' the same sheep over and over.

THAT makes One-Ton mad. He says he don't mind countin' sheep, but he draws the line at countin' the same scabby blats over and over. So he orders the gate shut, and he says he's goin' to count 'em outa curiosity and see just how many they are.

He fills his pockets with rocks, and he throws one down every hundred sheep agin, while we whoop and shove them blats past him. When we git done he says there is 1823 sheep, but he says that he might be one or two off. By this time One-Ton he seems to have settled down to this sheep-countin' job, takin' a real interest in it.

"How you feelin', One-Ton?" I asks. "Sleepy?"

"It's a hopeless case, boys," he states, discouraged. "The more sheep I count the wider awake I git. But I'd like to know if I was right in my count, and if it's all the same to yuh boys, I'd like to check back and count 'em over again."

Well, anything to oblige a pal, although it's dangerous, as we oncet knowed a forest ranger who counted thirteen thousand sheep in one day; right after that they had to take him to the bughouse.

But One-Ton he says he will take a chance on his brain bein' able to stand the strain, so we hollers and whoops at those blats again, them bein' kinda tired by now of jumpin' them poles, while One-Ton he throws down rocks. This time he gits 1824 as against 1823 before.

One-Ton he says he wants to know if there is really 1823 sheep or 1824, and while he thinks it won't do no good to his illness, he would like to make sure which it is.

So we shove 'em back agin, and this time when he counts 'em he gits 1825 sheep. So One-Ton he gits up his dander and says it is no wonder all sheepherders is loco, but he won't be satisfied until he really knows if they's 1823 or 1824 or 1825 sheep in that band.

By that time we are pretty tired of hustlin' them sheep through that pen, but what the duse, anything for a sufferin' pal. If he enjoys countin' sheep by moonlight, let him enjoy hisself. One-Ton he takes on something awful about this here difference in the count, and it looks to him like them sheep is mebbe playin' a dirty trick on him, and he allus heard sheep increased in population fast.

One-Ton he says he is handicapped countin' in the pens and he would like them range lice brung out in the open where he'll have a better chance to count 'em. And he climbs out over the pen and he yells for whiskey and sheep.

ABOUT that time we hear a roar from somebody and along comes old man Caraway, the owner of them blats, and he's yellin' as if somebody was actually hurtin' his ol' sheep. He's carryin' a double-barrel shotgun and he asks us what we mean by chasin' his sheep around and gittin' 'em wore out. And he yells that he'll blow us into small pieces with that lead spreader if we don't git the H. outa there.

A lot of nice talk for a sheep man to spread. It makes us mad, although we're as peaceful a bunch of cowboys as you'd find by ridin' a good long ways.

One-Ton in special he gits proddy over this uncalled for attitoode, and he all a-sudden jumps in and perceeds to take the shotgun away from Caraway, the same as a man takin' a stick o' candy from a yearlin' kid.

"And now," says One-Ton, "turn

out them sheep where I c'n see to count 'em. I'm goin' to settle this right now."

"I kin tell yuh how many sheep there is," yells Caraway. "There's five hundred and eighty-nine."

"I counted them sheep three times," says One-Ton severe, "and there's either 1823 or 1824 or 1825. And don't try to tell me I can't count one li'l band of lousy sheep."

"I tell yuh there's only five hundred and eighty-nine sheep in that bunch!" yells old man Caraway, but we don't pay no attention to him; we jist shoves them sheep out through a gate while that old feller threatens to sue us for damages.

It seems to us as we're hazin' out them blats that we heard some shots up town and some yellin', but we guess it's probably some roughneck shootin' out some lights, probably some uncivilized sheepherders. We got more serious business on hand than lissenin' to shots, to wit and namely, the countin' of sheep.

We git 'em out on the road and runs around 'em to keep 'em from breakin' south, while up town that yellin' gets louder and the shootin' more frequent. Sounds like a battle is goin' on, but what some roughnecks up town do is no concern of a bunch of serious-minded cowboys.

JUST as we're sorta stringin' them sheep out along the road, we hear a car comin' lickety split toward the tracks, and the guns git close. Then travelin' at least fifty miles per hour all a-sudden out from behind a string o' box cars shoots a big car, racin' down the road where we got them sheep. There's ditches on both sides of the road, and there ain't no place for that car which is travelin' at least fifty miles per hour to go, except smack into that bunch of sheep. The carnage is something awful. Blats is throwed high in the air, and the car natcherally come to a stop.

There's a sure 'nough tough bunch in that car, for they throws some mean cuss words.

"Git them sheep outa our road!" they yells, and then *Wham!* one of 'em throws a shot my way.

I jump ten foot and land a-goin'. More shots is whizzing our way and the nearest cover is the stockyard fence and that ain't no cover, havin' too many holes. All them gents in the car, there bein' four of 'em, has opened up with guns.

ANOTHER bullet zaps in the ground close to my feet, and I got a sudden desire for room and more of it. I know where there's plenty of it, a valley south twenty-five miles long, where I figger my legs c'n show their stuff. The stockyards is in the way, but I sprouts wings goin' over that fence, and soarin' alongside of me is the rest of the boys and old man Caraway, so scared his teeth is a-clatterin'. Us cowboys wasn't what you would call scared, but we would of been if we'd of had time to be.

All of us has run except that goof of a One-Ton; he stands until they throw a chunk of lead through his hat, and then he gits mad.

"Bust up my sheep countin', will yuh?" he says, and he grabs up that shotgun of old man Caraway's that we forgot all about. "Jist when I was gittin kinda sleepy, too."

"Oh, gosh!" says old man Caraway. "There ain't nothin' but birdshot in that thing, and he's fightin' that gang with it."

But One-Ton, he lets out a yowl of rage, and that gun goes *Wham! Wham!* And them boys in the car, as that gun whams it don't sound good to 'em. They lets out yells and then all of 'em sing out:

"We quit! We surrender!"

The firin' dies down but right after we hear another war-whoop and down acrost the tracks comes Sheriff Andy Causey with a bunch o' men

all luggin' rifles. They pull up and look at them birds standin' up in the car yellin' that they quit, and look at the sheep and finally at us.

"I THOUGHT the Canyon Lobo bunch would have something to do with this!" bawls Sheriff Andy Causey. "What the devil's goin' on?"

Them fellers comes out of the car, hands up, and crawls over the dead sheep, while the rest of the sheep stands around blattin'. It looks like we're goin' to be blamed for this, whatever it is, so I grabs One-Ton and all of us starts to run.

But Sheriff Andy Causey he hollers "Halt!" And when Sheriff Andy Causey hollers "Halt!" it's either halt or havin' your mail sent to some cemetery.

"What's the matter now?" I says.

"All the matter is," he bellers, "is that these four birds kidnaped the cashier of the Stockman's Bank tonight and made him come down to open the vault. They cleaned it out, but we got wind of it. They licked us up town and would of made their escape sure if not for you fellers stoppin' 'em with them sheep. And what, by the way, was you doin' out this time of night?"

"Whatever we was doin' was our own business," I returns at that. "Here we stop a bandit outfit, and I s'pose now we will be made to pay for the sheep that was killed?"

"Mebbe the bank will kick through on the sheep," says Sheriff Andy Causey, as he begins snappin' handcuffs. "Well, it's the first time any good come from the Hooker outfit comin' to town for a spree."

"We want it to be distinctly understood," I says dignified, "we didn't come to town for no spree."

"Have it your own way," says the sheriff careless, and me and One-Ton we decides we will go home.

"I would of kinda liked to count them sheep agin," says One-Ton as we whizzes along, "but part of 'em are dead, and I don't s'pose I will ever know if they was 1823 or 1824 or 1825 sheep in that outfit."

So he yawns and says "I feel kinda like I might be able to go to sleep." And all a-sudden I hear a snore from the back of the car. Back there snoozes One-Ton like a babe.

"Jist as I thought," I says to myself, gratified. "That sheep countin' turned the trick."

We pulls in at home a li'l after daylight, and my li'l brother Stevie and Old George and Pablo is a'ready ropin' out their horses to ride out.

"Jist in time," says my li'l brother Stevie, sour. "Pile on a pair horses and we'll go up and put in a real day huntin' them Squaw Crick steers."

"RIGHT after I finally got my old pal, One-Ton to sleep?" I says. "Even you wouldn't have the heart to wake him up."

"All right," says Stevie. "Let him sleep, but you ain't been sufferin' none from this wakin' sickness, Johnny Hooker. Rope yourself out a horse and make it a good one, account we got a lot o' hard ridin' to do today."

"A fine thing to ask of a hero!" I tells him. "It might be news to you that I helped capture a desperate gang of bandits what has robbed the Sunset bank?"

"All right, all right," yawns Stevie. "I believe yuh, but what's that got to do with you ridin' out after steers with us? C'mon, grab your rope."

Well, to tell the truth, I ain't so sleepy myself, and I might as well do a li'l ridin'. Seems to me I can still hear the bullets whizzin' all around me as I clears the side o' that loadin' pen, and a few shivers still travels up and down my backbone. Not that I'm scared or anything like that, but I guess mebbe I musta caught this here wakin' sickness from my old pal, One-Ton.

Triple-Action Western Thrills in

Raiders of

Hudkins' left hand clamped over a spreading stain in

CHAPTER I

Guns at Night

IN camp, "Squeaky" Johnson never slept as soundly as he did in a real bed. With hard ground for a mattress, he woke up every hour or so and shifted his bony places.

He came awake this time strangely alert. For no reason he could properly explain, he rose on an elbow. Nothing seemed changed, except that the air was a little sharper, the stars a little brighter. Yet he was filled with an unaccountable uneasiness. The sort of sixth trail sense that some men develop, warning them of impending danger.

A fitful breeze stirred the pine tops, whipping the embers of the fire to a feeble flame. On the yonder side of the fire lay "Chip" Riley, Squeaky's pardner, as silent in his sleep as in his waking hours. Squeaky had to look hard to see the slow rise

All Hell Pops Loose When the Hard-Ridin' Trouble

Pecos Valley

A Complete Novelette

By
JACKSON COLE

Author of "The Gun-Slinger From Sundown," etc.

the middle of his forearm, as bullets rang in the air

and fall of Chip's shoulders under his close-wrapped soogan.

Squeaky's vague dread flashed into sudden reality. Off by the timber's edge, not more than twenty yards away, a needle of fire flashed. A gun roared, sending echoes crazily dancing, shattering the eternal quiet of Ten-Mile Canyon.

Squeaky leaped. With a move of incredible swiftness, he flung his blanket on the flickering embers.

Pitch-dark now. He dived for his gun, under his saddle ten feet away. He hugged the ground, Apache-style. The shadowy bulk of Chip Riley was crouched beside him. The pair of them scanned the rim of starlit sky. Two guns waited to answer that nocturnal shot.

There was a while of ominous silence. A silence unbroken by the accustomed sound of their picketed horses. Had the animals broken their picket ropes and bolted? If so, it meant a long hike. They had

Shooters Take a Hand in the Rocking-O Fracas!

bought those horses only twelve hours before from "Ace" Hudkins of the Tumble T. The Tumble T was at the north end of Ten-Mile Canyon.

The acrid smell of burning wool filtered to their nostrils. Squeaky's blanket was scorching. Squeaky suppressed a shiver. Whatever happened, he was through with sleep for the night. However, in covering that brief, gust-fanned flare of the campfire, the blanket had probably saved their lives.

Then a voice came across from the timber that rimmed the meadow. A high, quavering voice, forced to a harshness intended to hide the fear in it.

"Better give up, you *hombres!* Come daylight, I'll get yuh, anyhow!"

For a moment Squeaky thought their challenger of the night was trying to mimic his own peculiar high-pitched tones. Then Chip moved closer to him and whispered:

"It's a kid! Just some red-eared youngster!" He sang out:

"What for you crave to get us, stranger? Talk up!"

The shaky voice returned:

"Me, I don't swap talk with rustlers!"

"Rustled what, yuh simple-minded knothead?" yelped Squeaky.

"My hosses!"

Chip spoke quietly.

"YOU let a wrong idea flap right off with you, son," he called. "We ain't your hoss rustlers. We're two job-hunting jaspers headin' for Rio Hondo. Reckon you better come over here where we can talk this over, comfortable-like."

A long moment of uncertainty, then:

"Then light up that fire, you *hombres!*"

Squeaky, at a grunt of assent from his pardner, rose and quickly rescued his blanket. He beat it in the dewy grass to save its charred remains. Chip heaped dry twigs on the coals and blew them into crackling brightness.

"C'mon, now!" he invited. "An' forget that shootin' iron for a spell, son. Let's go into this here rustler talk a little deeper!"

THERE must have been something in Chip's voice that invited confidence and belief, for presently a small figure emerged from the shadows beyond the flames. The visitor led a wiry, trim-legged black colt.

Chip, seemingly oblivious of the long-barreled Colt still suspiciously gripped in the caller's hand, was shoving a coffee pot into the hot ashes. He looked up, mildly amused, as a boy about fifteen years old, wearing hat and chaps too large for him, came up closer. Then the boy halted, feet spread wide, a hostile scowl on his determined young face.

"Howdy, son! Set, an' thaw out your shin bones," Chip invited.

"Yeah, and tell us why-so yuh go shootin' up peaceable folks in their sleep!" added Squeaky, ruefully examining the burned hole in his blanket.

"Reckon I kin let off a gun around here without askin' nobody's permission! This here's my range!"

"Yore range, huh? Yore old man's, you mean, mebbe so!" said Squeaky.

There was a catch in the boy's voice as he replied:

"I ain't got any old man. Not no more. I own the Rocking-O, my ownself. I'm Terry Owens."

Chip said: "Was your pop Lem Owens?"

"Sure!"

Chip and Squeaky exchanged silent, wondering looks.

"How come? Did you *hombres* know him?"

"Know him!" Squeaky burst out. "We worked for him one season,

over in the Cedar Brake country! A real he-man, Lem was, and a good cow man! What-all happened to him, huh?"

TERRY OWENS gulped and stepped closer to the fire.

"Shot down two weeks back. Over Rio Hondo way. In some sort o' ruckus." They could see the boy fighting a trembling lip. Then he resumed his blustering tone: "Say, them two sorrels you *hombres* fork, they belong to the Rocking-O! I tracked 'em up here from the ranch! I reckon you're walkin' from here on."

"Yeah? How's that, son?"

"I pulled their picket pins. They'll mosey back to the Rocking-O, savvy?"

Again Chip and Squeaky exchanged looks. Chip's lean, hatchet-featured face was grim when he turned to the boy.

"Better go catch 'em up, son, afore they drift too far. When you get back, this here java will be warmed through."

Terry Owens hesitated.

"Git along!" urged Squeaky. "Come daybreak, me an' Chip'll be headin' back to the Tumble T. We crave talk with Ace Hudkins. He sold us them sorrels yestiddy. Forty bucks apiece. Cold, sad cash."

The boy's eyes gleamed with sudden hate.

"Ace Hudkins, huh! So that mangy coyote aims to haze the Rocking-O bare, does he? Now that—that my pop's dead!"

"We'll settle Mister Hudkins' hash, young feller! You collect up them sorrels!" said Squeaky.

"I'll fight my own wars, savvy?" stormed Terry Owens. "I'm notchin' Hudkins' ears, my ownself!"

"He owes us that eighty bucks!"

"He owes me a lot more! Ace Hudkins was in that ruckus where—where my pop was—was murdered!"

Chip Riley got up quietly, crossed over to the boy, and laid an arm across his shoulders.

"Better set, son, and inhale some o' this java! Me, I'll collect up the sorrels!"

Terry Owens made no resisting move as Chip captured the reins of the black, swung to the saddle, and vanished in the darkness.

Squeaky was pouring some of the steaming, inky fluid from the pot into a tin cup.

"Looks like yore in need of a coupla cowpokes what are sort of expert at skinnin' pole cats, young feller," he announced. "Here. Drink hearty, boss!"

CHAPTER II

Pecos Poison

TEN-MILE CANYON was a rocky gap connecting the Tumble T and the Rocking-O. At the north end it widened and fell away into wide Pecos Valley. On the long slope at the canyon's entrance lay the weatherbeaten barns and corrals of the Tumble T. In the center of the huddle of buildings was Ace Hudkins' ranchhouse, a barren, unpainted, low-roofed dwelling, partly shaded by a straggly cluster of cottonwoods.

It was nearly noon when three horsemen descended from the canyon's mouth and rode the dim trail that led straight for the Tumble T.

"This here parley may turn out sort of quarrelsome," said Chip, unholstering his .45 and carefully inspecting the full-loaded cylinder. "Don't you reckon you better set out here aways and look on, son?"

"You *hombres* take me for that sort of a pickle-kneed pilgrim?" protested Terry Owens. "I done told yuh this is my war!"

"It'll be yore funeral if yuh go

foggin' up the scenery with that hunk of artillery like you did last night!" spoke up Squeaky. "I never did notice where that bullet hit!"

"I never aimed at neither one of you!" protested the boy. "My pop learned me never to shoot at nuthin' settin'! I just whizzed a slug over yore heads!"

"Well, don't go whizzin' no slugs over Ace Hudkins' head," instructed Chip. "If you do any whizzin' whatever, make out that Ace's belt buckle is a bull's-eye!"

"Now ain't that fine talk tuh be making around a young feller!" complained Squeaky. "Don't pay no attention to him, Terry. He ain't had no bringin' up!"

A thin smile flickered at the corners of Chip's mouth.

"My pardner, he's worried stiff that somebody'll beat him to it."

They were close to the cluster of buildings now. The corral was empty. There was no one in sight around the ranch. The only sign of human presence was a trickle of smoke that rose from the stovepipe that elbowed out from the kitchen end of the ranchhouse.

They crossed the ranch yard and reined up at the edge of the porch.

"Hudkins!" Chip called out.

THEY heard a shuffling step in the house. The screen door squeaked on its hinges and opened a crack. A slant-eyed, suspicious face peered out at them.

"It's Wah Lee, the Chinese cook!" Terry Owens said disgustedly.

"Boss man, he go townside!" Wah Lee imparted this brief intelligence in a sing-song voice, then closed the door.

"Come out here!" Chip ordered. "We make plenty wala-wala, savvy you?"

Wah Lee thrust a cautious nose against the screen. Chip spurred forward, until his sorrel's forefeet were planted on the porch. His hand shot out, bursting through the rust-rotted screen, grabbing the alarmed Chinese by his apron front. Chip gave a sharp tug, jerking Wah Lee and the door frame out together. Wah Lee jabbered excited Cantonese through the wrecked screen that ruffled his face and head.

"When did he go? Who went with him? And what for?" rasped Chip. "Spit it out, *pronto!*"

WAH LEE boiled over with information.

"Him go ketchum Missa Stone! Boss-man, two, thlee fellahs, they go make look-see Lio Hondo! Wah Lee, him dunno why-so, what-for!"

Chip released his hold on Wah Lee and turned to Terry Owen.

"Who's this Stone person, son?"

"Sid Stone, I reckon he means. He runs the bank at Rio Hondo."

"What time did Hudkins and his two-three men go to Rio Hondo?" Chip shot at Wah Lee.

"Las' night!"

"Look!" The exclamation jerked from Squeaky's lips. "Here they come now!" He pointed westward. Off about a mile across the slope, a yellowish dust column rose. Under it, speck-like in the distance, was a party of horsemen. They were riding hard, towards the Tumble T.

"Five o' them," counted Chip. "Go back in the house, Wah Lee. Boil up some water. A lot of it. Mebbeso the boss-man or somebody is going to get hurt, savvy you?"

"Me savvy plenty!" said Wah Lee, darting back into the kitchen. They heard his voice, in some sing-song heathen chant, as he busied himself at the kitchen range. Evidently the prospect of the boss-man or somebody getting hurt didn't depress Wah Lee.

Chip, Squeaky and the boy met the incoming cavalcade at the corral. Ace Hudkins, narrow-eyed, grunted a

"howdy." His three riders swung warily to the ground.

The fifth man remained slumped in his saddle, his light eyes flicking restlessly from Chip to Squeaky and to their flapless holsters.

He wore town clothes and a dusty black felt, trouser legs crumpled into boots. He was fat and his nervous, white hands played restlessly with the reins.

"It's Stone," whispered the boy.

"Hudkins, we come to collect eighty bucks. And the two lame critters we rode over from Antelope Basin." Squeaky believed in coming at once to the point.

Ace Hudkins' swarthy face twisted in a slow sneer.

"Or what?" he said.

White showed under the cold blue of Chip's eyes.

"Or eat dirt," he said distinctly.

Stone spoke up quickly.

"Hold on, boys. What's all this about?' he interposed.

"Hudkins sold us these two sorrels. They belong to the Rocking-O," Squeaky answered.

Stone smiled oil on troubled waters.

"Now, don't be hasty, stranger," he said smoothly. "You don't understand. I'm taking over the Rocking-O, on a mortgage foreclosure. Mister Hudkins, I've hired him to run the Rocking-O as a part of the Tumble T."

"WHERE at does that leave this kid?" demanded Squeaky.

"He'll be taken care of. I'm executor of his deceased father's estate, you understand?"

"Since when?"

"Judge Billings appointed me this morning. I'll show you the court order." Stone fumbled towards his inner coat pocket.

"Keep your hands showing, Stone!" snapped Chip.

The whiplash conversation left Terry Owens momentarily stunned. Then helpless fury swept over him.

"I know now what that ruckus meant at Rio Hondo!" he suddenly shouted. "I know you killed my pop, Hudkins, you thief! Nobody told me, but I know! And now we'll even it up!" The boy's hand was dragging the cumbersome long-barreled Colt from his hip.

WITH the sneer still on his lips, Ace Hudkins' gun hand made a lightning move. He was fast. But Chip Riley was faster. Chip's .45 leaped and spat flame. Hudkins rocked in his saddle, his sneer vanished. His gun fell to the dust and his gun hand dropped limply to his side. His horse, after its first leap at the roar of Chip's gun, danced on nervous, quivering legs. Hudkins' left hand clamped over a spreading stain in the middle of his forearm.

One of the three Tumble T men, shielded behind his horse, went for his gun. Squeaky's hand struck his holster. A second roar closely followed the first. The Tumble T man's face bowed against the skirt of his saddle, his clutching hands scratching on the leather in an attitude ludicrously resembling prayer.

Then he slid slowly to the ground.

Stone swore, reined around, and spurred for shelter around the barn.

"Stop!" shouted Chip.

A second Tumble T rider blazed across his saddle. A bullet ripped Chip's shirt under his left arm, searing his ribs. Squeaky spurred forward, leaned from his saddle, and thumped the man over the head with the butt of his gun. The man folded.

The third rider's hands shot up.

"Call it a day," said Chip. Then he rode after Stone.

The Owens boy, frontier bred and raised, was accustomed to rough scenes. But never in his brief span of years had he seen Judge Colt render a verdict as swift and terrible as

this. His eyes widened to the size of shiny pot lids.

"Migosh!" he breathed. "Migosh!"

There was no question now where his loyalty lay. Chip Riley had become his god.

"Young feller," said Squeaky, "Mister Hudkins' hardware's gittin' all dusty down there. Don't yuh reckon yuh'd like it for a souvenir, sort of?"

The boy sprang to the ground and recovered the gun that had been just a split-second slow. The gun that he was convinced had taken his father's life and nearly snuffed out his own.

"Better frisk that jasper what's holding up the sky, too," suggested Squeaky. "Also, if yuh crave to be plum acquisitive, there's a nice, bone-handled wee-pon that gent on the ground won't need no more."

The boy collected the arsenal. His belt bristled as he swung back on his black colt. Chip returned with Stone. They were stirrup to stirrup. Chip's .45 was poked deep into the banker's fat side.

"Now you can take that funny little piece o' paper you say you got from Judge Billings," Chip said, "and tear it up into a heap o' small pieces."

"Y-you men will look up a rope for this!"

"Do like I say!"

STONE'S trembling hands produced a legal-looking document. Reluctantly he tore it in half, then folded it and tore it again. The pieces fluttered to the ground.

"And now you head back for Rio Hondo," ordered Chip. "Ride straight. And carry the word that orphan-robbin' has gone out o' fashion in Pecos Valley!"

Muttering a farewell threat, Stone whirled and rode to the west.

"I'd say," spoke up Squeaky, "that we had our forty dollars worth."

Chip nodded. Smoke billowed out of the Tumble T stovepipe. The weird chant of Wah Lee floated across to the corral. Chip faced Ace Hudkins, who was winding his neckerchief around his bullet-nicked forearm.

"Your yeller boy has hot water ready," he said. Then he motioned to Squeaky and the boy. They started back trail, up Ten-Mile.

CHAPTER III

Pecos Law

IT was after dark when two men and a weary boy rode into the home spread of the Rocking-O. A light was burning in the ranchhouse window.

"The outfit's vamoosed," Terry Owens said, "But One-Shirt stayed."

He raised his voice in a loud hail. The door opened and a head poked out.

"Gee Crismus!" One-Shirt yelped. "I figgered yuh'd fell intuh a gopher hole somewheres! Gone all night thataway!"

One-Shirt brought a lantern. He proved to be a white-whiskered old-timer that Chip and Squeaky had known as the wagon cook the summer they rode for the elder Owens in the Cedar Brakes. He listened to the boy's excited account with growing enthusiasm. When it ended, One-Shirt chuckled in his beard.

"You fellers shore are a pair o' good simians like the Good Book speaks of," he vowed. "Or was it Samar-itains? Ennyhow, I'd a done the same thing, my ownself. Only I figgered I wasn't enough people for Ace Hudkins and his crowd."

"Yuh figgered correct, One-Shirt," agreed Squeaky. "Say, yuh ever figger how many eggs yuh could crowd intuh one skillet?"

"Nope, I never."

"Well, lope back to yore stove and

try it now. Might push in a ham or two besides, while we inspects these here saddles tuh see if they've took root and growed on."

They turned the horses into the pole corral.

Later, as they suppered, One-Shirt craved particulars.

"So they figger to pry the Rocking-O out from under Lem's boy, do they?" he said. "Judge Billings is a tough customer. Him and Sid Stone throw in together on a lot o' deals, mostly crooked."

"Tomorrow," Chip told him, "we aim to sort of sift down on Rio Hondo, to pay a visit on Judge Billings. Fact is, we was headed thataway when we met up with Terry."

"Right now," said Squeaky, rising from the table, "I crave tuh sleep off these yere ham and eggs."

He slept without waking that night in the Rocking-O bunkhouse. But Chip Riley napped lightly. Over at the Tumble T there was a dead man and another with a bullet-ripped forearm. Chip knew that Pecos law would not be long in seeking vengeance.

Ace Hudkins, Banker Stone and Judge Billings made three of a kind that one pair had never yet beaten.

CHIP and Squeaky hit the trail for Rio Hondo early. Though young Terry begged to go along, they refused him.

"Yuh got to grow up to that gun yuh pack, young feller," said Squeaky. "It'll take a spell. We promise tuh leave some bad *hombres* for seed. Yore chance'll come some day. As long as yuh got the Rocking-O, there'll be rustlers, plenty."

It was a two-hour ride. The trail descended into the town from a piñon ridge. Rio Hondo was a shipping point—a scattering of ramshackle, false-fronted buildings on a main street that paralleled the trail and the white-washed loading pens.

The main street consisted mostly of saloons. To the leading one, a place called the Best Bet, the two pardners went. An owl-eyed bartender was on duty. There were few customers.

"Where at are we likely tuh find one Judge Billings?" asked Squeaky.

One of the customers, who sat at a table toying with a solitaire deck, looked up sharply at the question. In the back mirror of the bar, Chip saw the man get up and silently depart through the swinging doors.

"IN bed," said the bartender, polishing glasses.

"What time the next train go through?"

"North or south?"

"Either."

"About noon."

"Reckon we better wake up the judge, then. He'll need time tuh pack."

The bartender halted his glass polishing and blinked at them.

"The judge beds down in his office. Above the bank. Down at the next corner. I ain't heerd nothin' about him goin' away."

"Neither's the judge," said Squeaky.

Chip paid for two ryes. They left the Best Bet, the bartender staring after them.

They had gone but a few steps, in the direction of the bank, when the man who had so abruptly left the table in the saloon appeared from around a corner a few yards ahead. He was followed by a large-bodied man with a square, determined face and two guns hanging low from crossed belts. There was a star on his vest.

"There they come, Sheriff!" said the man from the saloon.

The sheriff advanced in the middle of the board walk. He halted, face to face with Chip and Squeaky, spraddle-legged.

"You men are under arrest!" he

announced bluntly. His hands rested on his gun butts.

"On who's say-so?" Chip demanded.

"Sid Stone's. Yuh can read the warrants over in jail."

Squeaky shook his head.

"I'm skeered the light's bad there, Sheriff," he objected. "Mebbe-so we better look at 'em now."

The sheriff looked uncomfortable.

"They're in my safe, them warrants," he said. "But I don't need 'em to make a murder arrest, savvy? Come on!"

"Hold on!" Chip shot the words at him. "Who signed those would-be warrants?"

"Judge Billings!"

"Then you better poke 'em in the stove, Sheriff! They hold no more authority than tin-can labels!"

The sheriff's wide mouth drooped open momentarily. Then it snapped shut.

"Huh, that's a new one!" he grunted. "Since when—!"

The man who had fetched the sheriff moved furtively in back of Chip and Squeaky. Chip spun around just as the man drew a derringer from a shoulder holster.

Chip's fist whizzed out, cracking against the other's jaw. The man staggered back against a store front. Chip leaped after him, crashing another fist into his face.

He ducked just as the derringer spoke. The bullet raised splinters from the hitch-rail alongside the sidewalk. A window in a saddle shop across the street crashed.

CHIP struck again. Crimson spurted from the man's flattened nose. He sank to the walk. Chip jerked the derringer from his hand and tossed it into a puddle beside the hitch-rail.

He turned then to see Squeaky with his Colt trained on the sheriff's middle. The sheriff's hands were wavering towards his ears.

"Turn around, you, and lead us tuh Judge Billings!" Squeaky ordered. "Move along fast, sort of. I see citizens popping out o' cracks like cockroaches!"

The sheriff grunted and marched as ordered.

"You *hombres* are just stackin' up trouble fer yoreselves!" he promised over his shoulder.

THEY reached the bank. The sheriff led them into a narrow stairway. The derringer shot and the crashing of the saddler's window, as Squeaky had observed, was drawing scattered knots of Rio Hondoans to the street. And the man whose face Chip had battered was doing a Paul Revere on foot. Very soon there would be some show of organized resentment at the parading of the sheriff along the sidewalk with a gun in his back.

The sheriff began a grumbling ascent of the stairs, the two pardners close at his heels. He stopped once and panted:

"You *hombres* will regret this! You shore'll wish yuh'd chose the jail!"

"Move along!" Chip ordered.

They came to a dusty hall. The sheriff stopped wheezingly in front of a door.

"Hi-yu, Judge!" he bellowed. "Open up!"

There was the sound of slippered feet on a bare, board floor. A hand rattled the door knob. A key rasped in the lock. In that same instant there was a hiss of voices inside, a sinister sibilance that allowed Chip and Squeaky time to leap for either side of the door frame a fractional instant before the door was flung open.

Their quick suspicion was confirmed. The sheriff took one step into the room. There was a deafening blare of gunfire. The sheriff stiffened, whirled half around, then sagged limply to the floor, blood

gushing from wounds in head and body.

"Good God!" someone yelled. "You fools! You—you've killed Wirt!"

The speaker—it was Judge Billings, a baldish man in a dark lounging robe—flung himself to his knees beside the fallen man.

Chip and Squeaky hugged the walls. They both had their guns trained on Judge Billings.

"Crawl out and pull the door shut!" Chip gritted. *"Pronto!"*

The judge gaped up at the menacing muzzles. He scrambled into the hall on hands and knees.

Then there were heavy feet on the stairs that led up from the street. Came the voice of the man Chip had beaten and disarmed.

"They're up there! What's left of 'em!" he shouted. "Right lucky I warned the judge. Gave him time to get the crowd together!"

Chip and Squeaky realized that they had fallen into a trap that it would take a great amount of luck, plus fast, straight shooting, to extricate themselves from.

CHAPTER IV

Guns of Justice

ONE-SHIRT was consoling young Terry, who mourned at being left behind by the two pardners.

"Yuh see, them fellers got plenty on their minds. Yuh hear Chip admit last night they was headed for Rio Hondo afore they met up with you?"

"They're just cowpokes, lookin' fer jobs," argued the boy.

"Not no thirty-a-month bronc-peelin' job, sonny. Not them. Don't fergit, I knowed them fellers a long while back, Yuh ever hear yore pop mention the Trouble Shooters?"

"The gun-slingers that cleaned up that rustlers' den over in the Cedar Brake country? Sure!"

"Well, sonny, Chip and Squeaky, they're the Trouble Shooters! Yessir; and at last accounts I heerd, they was a sort of two-man vigilance committee, workin' direct under the Governor. Untanglin' land frauds!"

"Migosh!" blurted Terry Owens. "Wh-why didn't yuh tell me that last night?"

ONE-SHIRT winked solemnly and spit through his beard at the woodbox.

"I keep my bazoo buttoned an' my eyes open," he grinned. "I learn a lot most folks never see, sonny. Fer instance, yuh see that hen scratchin' out there? I bet yuh never noticed that all hens kick the same way. Never no different, not in a thousand times. See, two kicks with the left foot, then one with the right. I learnt that by keeping my bazoo shut an' my eyes—!"

"To heck with your old hen!" exclaimed Terry. He turned his back on One-Shirt, cast a pebble at the preoccupied fowl, and crossed disconsolately to the corral.

He perched on the top gate bar. He perceived now why the two strangers had made such a business-like job of it at the Tumble T. The Trouble Shooters had stumbled onto just such a case as they sought.

And now Chip and Squeaky were probably continuing their direct, vigorous methods in Rio Hondo. Terry longed to be there. He had seen one example of gunwork that dazzled the eye and bewildered the brain. He wanted to see more.

With sudden decision, he dropped inside the corral, riata in hand. His black colt began a quiet sneak behind the feed rack. But Terry whirled a loop that snaked out and settled over the wily young animal's neck.

A few minutes later, when One-

Shirt looked out towards the corral, young Terry was gone. So was the black colt.

The Trouble Shooters had started an hour earlier. But the boy's impetuosity drove the black over the trail at a space-devouring lope. Just as he reached the main street of Rio Hondo, he heard a blast of muffled gunshots.

Terry believed the guns of justice had started to deliver their just but terrible verdicts. He was yet to learn that Chip and Squeaky were in one of the tightest fixes in their gun-slinging career. The ring of land grabbers had them pocketed upstairs above Stone's bank.

THERE was a narrow window at the end of the hall, facing upon the street. A few feet under it was the frame extension that sheltered the sidewalk.

Simultaneously, Chip and Squeaky started for the window. They used Judge Billings for a shield to cover their retreat.

They dropped from the window to the wooden canopy. A head was thrust from a window of Judge Billings' office. The glint of a six-gun followed. Chip's Colt leaped and flamed. The six-gun fell to the canopy with a hollow thump. The head and shoulders dropped to the sill and hung there. A crimson drip stained the warped wood beneath.

The hall was a bedlam of shouts and thudding boots. Judge Billings fled from the hall window. One of his scowling henchmen framed himself in the opening. Squeaky fired. A scream; then a body toppled from the window and crashed down on the canopy.

The hall and stairs were full of men now. The two pardners scuttled to the eaves of the canopy and dropped to the edge of the sidewalk. Sid Stone stood in the entrance of the bank. At sight of them he uttered a dismayed squawk, and turned to run back into the bank.

Squeaky darted in after him. He clamped a hand in Stone's collar and whirled him around. He poked the muzzle of his .45 against the banker's nose.

"Listen, you!" he ordered. "Get upstairs, *pronto!* Keep that crowd up there!"

"My God, I can't do that! What the devil do you think I—!"

Squeaky slapped Stone with a sideswipe of the .45 barrel. Stone staggered, clamped a hand to the welt on his cheek and moaned.

"Can do now?" Squeaky rasped savagely.

Stone bobbed his head and ran his tongue around a loosened tooth. He was the color of chalk.

"Keep 'em up there, but tell 'em to send down Billings!" Squeaky snarled. "Our business is with him!"

Stone swayed to the door and toward the stairs. Squeaky hastened him with a shove.

One of the mob boiled out onto the canopy, as the Trouble Shooters had done, and made a leap for the street. Chip's Colt caught him in mid-air. The man slammed to the dust, stomach down, and remained there motionless.

STONE was blocking the stairway now.

"It ain't no use!" he screeched. "Stay back, stay back!"

A big man in a black sateen shirt swore and pushed past Stone. He emerged onto the sidewalk, two revolvers jutting out at waist level. They both banged at once. Squeaky's .45 answered. The big man hunched and pitched forward, his two guns banging again as his trigger fingers twitched for the last time.

One of the slugs from his first volley had caressed the tip of Chip's right shoulder. Swearing, Chip stepped behind a wooden pillar.

Squeaky was standing in the bank doorway.

Stone was still haranguing the roaring mob on the stairs. There was a brief, ominous silence up in Billings' office. Then a prolonged burst of shooting drowned out all sound of voices. A hail of bullets smashed down through the canopy and sent splinters dancing from the sidewalk. Squeaky raised his .45 over his head and sent two quick shots through the ceiling of the bank. A prompt roar responded—a roar through which was threaded the thin, high scream of a hit man.

THE Trouble Shooters had made a miraculous escape. The tables were turned. Most of the lawless Rio Hondoans who were Judge Billings' adherents were in that *cul de sac* upstairs. But along the street a few stragglers appeared.

They saw the two supposed victims on the sidewalk, shooting it out. From a doorway near the Best Bet Saloon a bareheaded man with a black neckerchief ran out. He began a stealthy advance along the line of wooden pillars at the edge of the sidewalk — pillars which supported the canopies that fronted most of Rio Hondo's places of business.

In his hand he carried a murderous-looking sawed-off shotgun.

Both Chip and Squeaky failed to see him. The man neared them and raised the shotgun to his shoulder. He was waiting for Chip to expose himself. The range was close. A screaming charge of buckshot would be sure death. A bloody, mangling, horrible death.

Along the street came a boy on a black colt. The man with the shotgun failed, in his absorption, to see or hear the approaching rider. But young Terry, from his vantage of a widened angle, saw Chip. With a gust of horror he realized that when Chip changed his position ever so slightly, the shotgun would blast its cowardly charge.

Terry Owens wore, as was his habit, the long-barreled Colt that had been his father's. He whipped it from the holster, raised it with an effort, fought for steadiness, and squeezed.

The gun leaped high in his hand. The man with the shotgun leaped, too. He sprang convulsively, like a heart-shot, stalking panther. He came down in a limp heap. The shotgun clattered to the sidewalk.

Young Terry had acquired a penchant for collecting dead men's guns since the fray at the Tumble T. He dashed to the edge of the walk and appropriated the sawed-off shotgun.

He started toward his friends with a triumphant yell.

"Keep away, keep away!" Chip shouted desperately.

The boy waved the shotgun and galloped on. A crackle of shots sounded from the windows above. Dust spurted around the black colt. Terry's hat leaped from his head with a slug-rip in the crown.

WITHOUT reining in, Terry snapped the shotgun to his shoulder. It banged twice, nearly knocking him from the saddle. Gunsmoke billowed behind him like the plume of a charger. Twin agonized choruses shrilled from the two windows above the bank.

Those two charges of scattering, leaden pellets had made a shambles of Judge Billings' office and the hall. Men bellowed like stampeded cattle. The wounded threshed on the crowded floor. It was a mad and terrible medley of suffering that filled the main street of Rio Hondo with the sounds of hell's hottest depths.

And then came surrender. Abjectly, a score or more of hard-shooting Rio Hondoans waved flags of truce. Flags made of shirt backs ripped from their owners. Flags

blood-spattered, stained with gunsmoke.

Sid Stone tottered out of the hall, where wisps of bluish smoke curled, holding a white handkerchief over his head.

"Th-they're sending Billings down now!" he gasped.

Judge Billings came next. Squeaky stepped to one side of him, Chip at his other elbow. They marched him in the direction of the Best Bet, where their horses were. Young Terry sat boldly on the black colt, keeping vigil at the windows and stairs.

CHIP gritted a few ominous words in Judge Billings' ear. Billings, who still wore his brown robe, looked like some condemned *padre* of medieval times marching to the execution block. He nodded frantic agreement to Chip's measured words.

They reached the hitch-rail where the pardners' horses stood. They swung to their saddles, the two men who had tamed Rio Hondo. They ordered the ringleader of the Pecos raiders into the street in front of them.

Down the track, the noon train whistled.

Chip and Squeaky herded Judge Billings to the station.

At a clattering gallop, young Terry caught up with them.

"Migosh!" he panted. "Migosh!" Again his eyes were as big as one of One-Shirt's pot lids. Then he saw the red, spreading patch on Chip's shoulder. He uttered a wail of sorrow.

"You're hit!" he cried.

"Just nicked, son. Reckon I ain't so handy at pickin' up useful souvenirs as you are!" The boy was lugging the empty sawed-off, in the crook of his arm.

They did not wait to see Judge Billings board the train. It was pretty certain that he had no desire to turn back and face the ire of his fellow townsmen. But alongside the loading pens was a bucket of whitewash. The man who had been daubing the fences and gates with a dazzling new coat had vamoosed for cover, along with the rest of neutral Rio Hondo.

Squeaky swung from the saddle and captured the brush. He rode alongside the station shed. He quickly marked in bold, straggly letters:

ADIOS, RIO HONDO

He paused, turning to young Terry.

"How yuh write 'trouble'?" he wanted to know.

"T-r-o-u-b-l-e," spelled the boy. "Migosh, it's funny that a *hombre* who can make so much of it can't write it!"

"I'd learnt tuh spell," replied Squeaky, "only they always usta switch dictionaries on me."

Whereupon he swung the brush again and signed the phrase that had spread fear on rustler ranges from Montana to the Rio Grande.

THE TROUBLE SHOOTERS

Then the three of them hit the trail for the Rocking-O.

CHAPTER V

Hate Dies Hard

EVENING had settled down on the Rocking-O. One-Shirt listened raptly on the kitchen steps to Terry's exciting account of the coup at Rio Hondo. Squeaky, perched on the wash basin bench, possessed himself in patience as long as possible. Finally he interrupted.

"Hi, One-Shirt," he inquired, "yuh know how many eggs can be got intuh one skillet?"

"'Bout two dozen, I reckon, if I had 'em. If them dang hens would

only quit scratchin' and go tuh layin' more egges!"

"Light up yore stove! I'll vamoose out tuh the barn and see if I can't collect yuh up a hatful."

"If yuh cain't find aigs, collect up hens!"

Squeaky found the eggs. Supper soon followed. Chip plied a fork with difficulty on account of his stiffening shoulder. He was in a thoughtful, almost somber mood.

"Rio, from now on, ought to be the most law-abidin' community in the Pecos country," he said.

"It come might' near bein' a complete clean-up. Only Sid Stone's still got that mortgage," opined One-Shirt.

"That was a honest debt. It's got to be paid off with money, not bullets."

"I'll pay it!" promised young Terry. "The Rocking-O is good range and I'll make it produce big. You *hombres* aim tuh stay and help me, don't yuh?"

Chip and Squeaky exchanged furtive glances.

"We'd sure admire tuh settle down as peaceable cowpokes, young feller," said Squeaky non-committally.

One-Shirt chortled wisely in his beard.

"Huh! I know fer a positive fact you jaspers ain't lit anywhere in the past five years long enough tuh make a shadow, hardly!"

THE boy looked questioningly at at the Trouble Shooters.

"Reckon yore right, One-Shirt," said Chip slowly. "We'll be driftin' down the long trail purty *pronto*."

A silence fell over them all. Justice had made long strides that day; but it had advanced over the bodies of dead men. Chip lit a cigarette and went outside. He looked up at the purple sky, where the stars were coming out one by one; and he meditated on the enigma of human existence. He wondered why civilized men should plot and steal and kill in a land of such serene abundance.

Squeaky came out and silently joined him. They were always that way, the two of them, after their guns had taken their tragic toll.

WHATEVER recrimination they felt was swiftly banished a few hours later.

It was dawn. The time when savage men, from time immemorial, chose to overcome their enemies by stealth and surprise. A grim cordon of men rode down on the Rocking-O from the direction of Ten-Mile Canyon. The rider who led them wore a stained bandage on his right forearm. His face was set in lines of implacable hate. From his saddle rigging hung a looped rope that was a symbol of sinister vengeance in the Pecos country.

On reaching the sleeping, unsuspecting Rocking-O spread, the horsemen spread out by a prearranged maneuver. One man rode into the ranchyard and approached the silent house, while the others surrounded it.

The trap set, Ace Hudkins reined in at the door.

He drew his six-gun and rapped loudly with the butt.

Almost at once a sleepy voice answered.

"Who's there?"

"Yore neighbors, One-Shirt," spoke up Ace Hudkins. "We don't mean no harm to you or the kid. But we want Riley and Johnson. We want 'em now."

There was a moment of thick silence. Then:

"Why don't yuh git 'em?"

"We aim tuh git 'em. Fer keeps. It ain't no use to resist. There's a ring o' guns out here. Sid Stone, he warned them *hombres* they'd be look-

in' up a rope. Well, we got the rope!"

"Hudkins, yo're barkin' up the wrong tree, ain't you?"

"What yuh gittin' at, yuh old fool?"

"What if I'd say they ain't here?"

"I'd say yuh was a blame liar!"

"'Twouldn't make me one. Cause they ain't!"

"Where are they?"

"Listen here, Hudkins. I'm goin' on sixty. Yuh know how I lived so long? By keepin' my bazoo buttoned!"

"Yeah? Well I'm coming in and unbutton it, you stubborn old fossil!"

"Come ahead!"

By now Chip and Squeaky were thoroughly awake and alert, in the bunkhouse, where they had chosen to sleep. The bunkhouse was thirty or so paces from the house, in the direction of the corral. They had overheard Ace Hudkins. In the vague half-light they could see him, tense in his saddle by the door of the house. From the small, square bunkhouse window they could make out the dim shapes of other riders, spaced at regular intervals, waiting.

"It's the Tumble T outfit. On the prod, plenty," Squeaky whispered hoarsely. "Ten or a dozen of 'em!"

Chip was strapping on his gun.

"We made a plum bad mistake. We should of drifted on last night."

"ALL my doin's, not yores, Chip. Just because I craved one more good night's sleep on a honest-to-Gawd mattress! Look, Chip, that Hudkins feller is off his hoss! He's startin' in the house after old One-Shirt! Me, I got a idea! I'm bustin' out o' here and tryin' tuh make it to that hoss!"

"Get goin'! Before she turns any lighter!"

Squeaky cautiously opened the bunkhouse door. He gathered himself, leaped into the open, and hit running. He was halfway across when the gun of the nearest horseman blazed. It was guess shooting. In that light the keenest eye could only make a blur of sight notches.

The bullet went wide. But the report served as an alarm. The circle of horsemen began to close in.

Ace Hudkins burst out of the house just as Squeaky vaulted into his saddle. Hudkins' six-gun was in his hand. He levelled it at Squeaky's back. A dead certain target.

Chip dashed from the bunkhouse. Ace Hudkins spun around. For an infinitesimal instant they faced each other across that brief span of thirty paces.

HUDKINS' six-gun swung on Chip. The latter's gun was still in its holster when Hudkins fired. Chip was slowly walking forward. He drew without any apparent effort at haste. Then Hudkins fired again.

It sounded like a double report, so close was Chip's shot behind it. Chip still strode forward, steadily. Hudkins cursed, stumbled and dropped to one knee. He aimed again.

Chip fired once more, as Hudkins was making a supreme effort to steady his sights on his oncoming Nemesis. The Tumble T raider cursed once more, weakly. His gun hand wavered. All strength seemed to seep from him. He crumpled slowly sidewise, then rolled over, knees up, eyes staring sightlessly at the grey sky.

By now the Tumble T men were whooping like attacking Indians and pursuing Squeaky. They were filling the air with lead. But it was still too dark for good shooting.

A gun roared alongside the house. One of the war party, spurring at a mad run some eighty yards away, plain against the rim of light in the east, emitted an unearthly yell and toppled from his saddle.

The blast sounded again. Another Tumble T rider squealed with pain, dropped his gun, and clamped onto

the saddle horn as his horse went into a series of savage bucks.

Chip ran around the side of the house. The blunt barrels of the sawed-off shotguns were poked from a window. Behind them was One-Shirt's tousled head.

"Me, I had a handful o' buckshot shells stashed away! Plum lucky, wasn't it?" he yipped. He crammed in new loads, snapped the breech shut, and banged both barrels at a flying horseman headed toward the trail to Ten-Mile and the Tumble T.

"We got 'em on the run!" he yelled. "They got their bellyful!"

From the cover of the yonder side of the corral, Squeaky's Colt was booming steadily. Four, five, six shots, then a pause as he reloaded. But by the time he had refilled the cylinder, there was not a Tumble T rider in sight. But the faint, diminishing sound of hoofbeats sounded up the trail toward Ten-Mile.

The dawn attack had failed. Squeaky rode back to the house, the rope that had been intended to hang him swinging at his knee.

HE dismounted, untied the rope from the saddle rigging. He was kneeling beside the lifeless body of Ace Hudkins when Chip returned. The two of them lifted Hudkins' remains to the saddle, lashed it there, then whacked the Tumble T horse on the rump. The animal, nickering, set out in pursuit of the vanquished raiders.

One-Shirt poked his head out of the kitchen door, smoke still curling from the muzzles of the sawed-off in his hand.

"Where's the boy?" Chip demanded.

"Now that's funny! I been a-wonderin', my ownself. Figgered mebbe he dashed outside!"

"He never!" declared Squeaky. He voiced the dread that was in the minds of the three of them. "Yuh s'pose that—that the Hudkins' gang *drilled* the kid? By God, if they did—!"

ONE-SHIRT abruptly turned back in the house. The pardners heard the thump of his sock-clad feet on the floor. Then very promptly, the quicker pat-pat of them as One-Shirt returned to the kitchen door.

He thrust his head out, grinning.

"Come on in here, you fellers!" he whispered hoarsely.

They followed him in and through the house to a room at the front. The growing light of day seeped through a window. By the window was a cot. On it, sprawled blissfully, lay the young owner of the Rocking-O, unaware that the last menace to his peaceful occupancy had been wiped away with the death of Ace Hudkins.

One-Shirt whispered:

"He's had a mighty lively two days of it. Plum tuckered, I reckon. When I was a tadpole like him, I could of slept through thunder an' dynamite, my ownself."

Then he tiptoed from the room. The sleeping boy stirred restlessly.

Chip and Squeaky exchanged silent, meaning looks. Then Chip nodded and Squeaky said:

"Good a time as any, ain't it? Before he wakes up."

The Trouble Shooters went from the room. They left the house and crossed to the corral. The eastern sky was pink now, and the stars had winked out. The light of a new day bathed the wide-flung range of the Rocking-O. Presently two riders with soogan rolls behind their saddles turned their backs in farewell on the ranch and hit for the hills.

Jackson Cole Throws A Mean Story Lariat—and You'll Find More of His Swell Yarns in Coming Issues of THRILLING WESTERN!

Dark Horseman

He whirled, smothering a gasp, as the door opened

Tip Linster Rides the Outlaw Road in Quest of Justice —and Smacks Up Against the Most Powerful Hombre in the Cowtown of Sundog

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "The Ghost Rider of Red Rock," "Long Trail's End," etc.

THE road ran along a cliff and perilously near to the brink. Scraggly-bearded Eleazer Mott, the driver, kept whipping his horses up; he seemed wholly unmindful of the sheer fifty-foot drop at his left, a drop that ended at the edge of a now muddy and swollen little river.

Two passengers sat inside the sun-blasted old stage coach. One of them was middle-aged and fat, and wore

a sheriff's star; his name was John Cleveland. The other was a tall, lean, young cowboy prisoner with smouldering granite-grey eyes and a tightly set jaw.

"You might as well come clean, Tip," Cleveland said. "It'll be in yore favor, you know."

"IN yores, you mean!" flared Tipton Linster, with a rueful glance toward the irons on his wrists. "You got no proof on me, John. The stage is stuck up by a lone hand, and the strong-box with a heap o' money in it is took. A few days later, you find me with a heap o' money in my p'session, forget that I could 'a' come by it a hundred ways besides robbery, and arrest me! You shore ain't got any real proof on me, John."

"The Sundog judge and jury will figger that it's real," the officer replied, "on account o' that trouble you had with Jeff Browder."

He had spoken wisely, and Tip Linster realized the fact. Tip swore softly and sank back on the jouncing seat.

Jeff Browder, big man of Sundog City and Sundog County—owner of this stage line, two cattle outfits, the Royal Straight Saloon and two general merchandise stores—had wanted a little spread that represented Linster's lifetime savings, because it wedged into the wide JB range and was well watered. Linster hadn't wanted to sell at any price. Whereupon the big man had tricked him, and in a fashion so raw that Tip had more than once been sorely tempted to kill the big man.

"John," said Tip to his captor, "yo're a good citizen, or want to be. But you cain't seem to get some things through yore head. I'm tellin' you again, I shore thought it was a mortgage for two thousand dollars, when I signed that quit-claim deed to my place. I didn't bother to read the document; I ain't any lawyer. When you want to borrow money, you got to go to Jeff Browder for it. You know that. I wanted this money to buy me a bunch o' new stock, John, you see."

"Ignorance of the law, or carelessness," sternly observed the fat sheriff, "excuses nobody. That was a genuine deed, Tip, duly witnessed."

After a moment, Linster said, in a voice so hard that it almost clanked:

"Even if it was me that held up the stage, John, it wasn't half as low-down as the way Browder treated me. Why, my little Tumblin' L Bar was wo'th eight thousand, easy!"

"So yo're admittin'—"

"I'm admittin' nothin' ay-tall," the cowboy cut in. He sat up straight. "With that Sundog judge and jury waitin' to send me to the state prison for twenty or thirty years? I should say not."

ONCE more the thought of his rotting behind prison bars turned nerve and sinew within him to steel, made him desperate. In that moment he would have tackled Hades alone with half a pint of water. Acting solely on the impulse of the split second, he shot his manacled hands toward the sheriff's holstered Colt—and he got it!

Cleveland seized the weapon by the barrel. A furious struggle began. Linster might have shot the officer; but he wouldn't. Then Tip thrust a booted foot against Cleveland's barrel-like chest and gave him a terrific shove, breaking his hold on the gun, and the next instant Tip had kicked the right-hand door open and was tumbling to the rocky road.

"Stop!" John Cleveland bellowed to the driver. "Stop—let me have yore gun, Eleazer, quick!"

He was half in and half out of the vehicle now. Mott sawed back hard on the reins. The brake screeched. Cleveland sprang to the ground, caught the driver's old Colt in mid-

air, and wheeled to look for his escaping prisoner. Linster was running a zigzag course swiftly in order to make of himself a difficult target. A loose stone rolled under his foot, and he pitched over the edge of the cliff!

Officer of the law first and human being afterward, Cleveland had fired, too late. Linster, brushing an outward jutting stone, struck the water with a great splash. Again the sheriff thumbed a gun-hammer. The cowboy in the river became inert, turned over in the swirling torrent, sank, showed again, sank again—vanished.

"Gosh!" growled Cleveland, uneasily. He came very near to being man instead of officer then. "I shore didn't mean to kill him!"

"Why, mebbe you didn't kill him, John," comfortingly drawled the closely watching Eleazer Mott. "Mebbe he'd knocked hisself onsensible on that rock outcroppin' as he fell, and has drownded. I nearly believe I seen yore second bullet hit water right aside of him."

Cleveland sent his worried gaze down the clay-colored stream, on past Linster's floating hat. A few hundred yards below, the opposite bank, too, rose sheer, formed half a canyon that ran for miles before it debouched into slightly rolling cattle country. No chance whatever of recovering the body, the officer decided. Later, doubtless, a skeleton would be cast up somewhere. Moodily John Cleveland climbed back into the old stage coach, and Eleazer Mott drove him on toward Sundog City.

LINSTER had not been the least hurt in brushing rock midway of his fall. The second bullet had merely scorched an arm for him. He had simply held his breath and gone limp, while a stretch of contrary current carried him to a bank cut-in and out of the sheriff's range of vision. There he'd come to the surface, and was holding patiently to a jagged point of stone. The Cleveland gun was gone, as well as his hat.

A quarter of an hour after the clacking of iron-shod hoofs and wheels had died away, he swam the muddy torrent at a long downstream angle—it was difficult, because of the manacles—and crawled up the lower, willow-lined bank.

"So Tip Linster is dead now," he told himself, with a hard grin.

Perhaps he could somehow use that to force Jeff Browder into giving up the little Tumbling L Bar, apple of his eye!

HIS mind worked fast. On this side of the river, he was many miles nearer to Sundog than the stage coach was on the other side; the stage went by way of a small town called Fireplace on its way in, would not reach Sundog until after nightfall. The money that John Cleveland had taken from him in Hartsville before he'd had an opportunity to bank it, and more money, probably, was in the new strong-box at old Mott's feet. If he could manage to get his hands on the box — well, they wouldn't lay this at his door, if he used his wits, for they thought he was dead!

He started briskly for the Double S Ranch, down in the edge of the rolling grasslands. Sam Stanton had been his father's friend in the old days, and was his friend now. There were few who disliked Jeff Browder more than this grizzled pioneer cattleman disliked him. Stanton knew how scurvily Browder had dealt with Tip Linster.

The sun was low when Linster reached Double S headquarters. He saw nobody about the place. Bringing up short at the retama-edged veranda, he hallooed softly. Old Stanton came out with a newspaper in one hand and a cob pipe in the other, recognized the caller immediately,

and hurried down the steps to him.

"By thunder, Tip; irons, eh?" The ranchman's voice was heavy with anger and resentment. "So they think it was you stuck up the stage. Well, I'm glad somebody was able to put somethin' over on Browder. Dang him, I always had a hunch that Ben Gantt killed my brother Henry, and that Jeff was back of it; Henry and Jeff'd had trouble over cattle. Where's the sheriff?"

Ben Gantt was a JB range boss, and Browder's star henchman. Linster gave a brief account of his escape, then went on, speaking rapidly:

"Sam, I didn't stick up the stage. But I was ridin' to Fireplace, and I happened to see the holdup. I thinks to myself: the stage line's responsible for any money it carries, and here's a way for me to get even with Browder; so I lit in and robbed the robber, after the stage had gone on! I don't know who the *hombre* was; don't want to know.

"Well, I rode to Hartsville to bank the money, day or so later. John Cleveland caught me there and took the *dinero* from me, and arrested me. Also he took back the two thousand Browder'd paid me for my little spread, thinkin' I'd got that, too, out o' the stage strong-box!"

"I'll be danged!" gasped Stanton.

TIP nodded, and pursued:

"I hate turnin' stickup. But Browder's got to give me back what's mine, and I cain't figger out any other way o' makin' him do it. If they hadn't took even my two thousand — Jeff will swear that this money, also, was in the strong-box— mebbe I wouldn't turn stickup. Now listen close to this.

"I don't want to get you into any trouble, Sam. But if you think you can do me some favors and not have to suffer—well, I want these handcuffs busted off, and I want a good hawss, saddle, and different clothes, all of 'em hard to see in the dark, and a gun and belt."

"Shore, I'll fix you up," eagerly replied Stanton. "Be tickled to. Know where that old prospector cabin on Dead Hawss Creek is, Tip, don't you, back in the hills a ways? Now you make that yore hideout, son. I'll be takin' a supply o' grub there for you, inside of an hour or so. Le's hustle to the anvil and bust them irons off, first thing."

Less than twenty minutes afterward, a slender figure in dark clothing left Double S Ranch headquarters on a fast, unbranded, sunburnt black horse, and made for the stage road at a point some two miles out of Sundog City.

NIGHT had just gathered thickly when Linster reined the willing black to a halt in tall chaparral beside a bowlder that marked an abrupt turn in the road. The stage coach would have to go slow here. Tip was none too early. Already his ears had caught the rattle of hoof and wheel. Quickly he drew his silken neckerchief over his face to his eyes. There was small danger of his being recognized in the darkness, but he was taking no chance that he didn't have to take. He grinned a slow, highly amused grin. They wouldn't accuse Tip Linster of this; Tip Linster was dead!

The vehicle came on, slowed for the sharp turn. A dark horseman appeared suddenly at the left front wheel. The muzzle of a Colt six-gun was very close to Eleazer Mott's scraggly-bearded face. Mott clapped a foot on the brake lever, pulled his team to a dead stop, elevated his hands. Not a word had passed. The dark horseman then snatched the driver's gun out of leather and tossed it into the scrub, and snatched the new strong-box down to his saddle-front. The next second he was gone!

"Hey," came in a drawling voice

from inside the vehicle, the voice of Sheriff John Cleveland. "What you stoppin' here for, Eleazer?"

Mott's shaky answer was lost to the ears of the now rapidly moving Linster.

Tip knew very well that he couldn't be trailed that night, and after he'd put a mile behind him he slowed the black to a walk. Then he rode into rocky terrain that would not show hoofprints plainly, rambled for a few minutes, made for a creek and entered it at an eastward angle, turned his mount and rode westward in the rocky bed for half an hour. As he pulled the black out of the water and into a lush wild meadow, he said to himself, with a low chuckle of delight:

"It'd shore take a peacherino of a trailer to foller that!"

He rode for Dead Horse Creek, in the pinon-dotted hills.

With the food supplies that Sam Stanton had left for him in the ancient cabin, Linster found a blanket, tallowdips, matches, and a bag of horsefeed. He lighted one of the tallowdips, and proceeded to shoot the locks off the new strong-box. Inside he found his own two thousand dollars, the three thousand that he'd taken from the unknown highwayman, and a thousand more, all in currency.

HE put it back and laughed aloud. Money was Jeff Browder's one and only god, and just about now Jeff would be beginning to throw full-grown conniption fits. Tip wished he could see Browder, and hear him—especially, hear him—it would be worth a year of life! Then Tip sobered. Well, why couldn't he? It wasn't so far down to Sundog. Besides, he craved a smoke, must have tobacco.

He hadn't bothered to take his wet Durham from a pocket of the trousers he'd left at Stanton's.

He hid the strong-box and its contents deep under a ledge, not too near the cabin. After a bolted supper of cold food, he mounted the sunburnt black and rode for the county seat.

LINSTER had not over-estimated Browder's fury. A tall and angular man of forty-seven, rock-faced, his pale-blue eyes a pair of burning slits, the big man of town and county paced the floor of his office in a rear corner of the Royal Straight Saloon building and heaped bitter anathema upon the heads of all stage drivers and all sheriffs.

Now and then he shot a glance of contempt toward old Eleazer Mott, who was slumped in a chair, bearded countenance almost ghastly in the lamplight. Browder had no ears for the hilarity of the night crowd in the big room beyond the partition wall; the intermittent tinkling of the bar cash register bell, ordinarily sweet music to him, went unheeded.

"Well, anyway," he fairly spat at Mott, "Tip Linster's dead, and that's something. But who in tarnation's this new stickup?"

"I done told you ten times," moaned the stage driver, "I hadn't no idee a-tall. Jeff, he was the biggest *hombre*, on the biggest hawss, I ever seen. And he had the biggest gun. And he was that quick and smooth, Jeff, that—that I nearly believe he was a ghost!"

"Yeah?" angrily sneered Browder. He jabbed a cigar between his teeth, bit it in two, threw both pieces savagely at his spur-scarred and untidy desk. "Well, I'm hiring a driver who don't believe in ghosts, one that'll be willing to burn a little gunpowder in order to protect my property. You've got two weeks' wages due tonight, but I'm not going to pay you a red *centavo*. Now get out of here, you old rat!"

Mott rose with alacrity that must

have surprised Browder. Spirit showed in his wizened face.

"I reckon you better not fire me, Jeff," he said, "and I reckon also you better gi' me my wages. If you don't—"

He broke off and shrugged eloquently. Browder took up the thread:

"If I don't, you'll talk some. Correct, eh? Very well; keep your job, Eleazer, and I'll give you your money."

Browder had become very suave. He stepped to a battered safe beside his desk, soon had the iron door open and was taking out banknotes of small denominations. Without a word Mott pocketed the tiny roll, and went into the saloon, closing the door behind him. Jeff Browder turned with the intention of locking his safe—and found himself staring straight into the barrel of a .45 Colt six-gun.

The big man paled, reached for the double-action Colt .38 that he carried holstered in his left armpit, thought better of it and reached ceilingward.

"Well?" he barked. "Now what?"

NO answer. The man who held the leveled .45 was tall and slender, in dark clothing from top to toe, with a dark-blue silken neckerchief over his face to his granite-grey eyes. He had come through an open window without a telltale sound. He placed his left forefinger perpendicularly across the mask at his lips, an order for silence. Keeping his gun ready, he moved swiftly to the open safe and dropped to one knee.

"Wait—" shakily began Browder. "You—"

A hoarse growl of warning came smotheredly from behind the dark-blue silk. The big man subsided, his features working in futile, beaten rage. He could see a whole boot hill down in the barrel of the unknown's heavy Colt.

The left hand of the unknown moved deftly, swiftly. Sheaf after sheaf of paper money he transferred from the inside of the safe to the inside of his black sateen shirt. Tip wished now that he had locked the door that opened into the saloon. Suddenly he rose, smothering a gasp.

That door swung wide, and there stood John Cleveland, the fat Sundog sheriff!

LINSTER had to think fast, faster than either Jeff Browder or the officer. He darted in behind Browder and gave him a shove that sent him hurtling against Cleveland, and dove for the open window that had given him entrance shortly before. Cleveland got steel out of leather quickly and thumbed a hammer. Just as Tip's hands and feet struck alley ground simultaneously, the sheriff's bullet crashed through the wall below the windowsill and collided with his skull a little back of the left ear.

Although the wall had taken away much of the heavy slug's force, the shock was enough to drive Linster down on his face, dazed and strangely weak. His inclination was to lie there. But will power that he hadn't known he possessed ordered him peremptorily to his feet. He could hear Cleveland yelling to Browder. It sounded dim.

"Bring the lamp to the alley, will you, Jeff? I'm shore I got him. Now I reckon we can see who he is!"

Tip staggered and fell. He realized somehow that to be caught meant the end of all worthwhile things for him, and that he had but a few seconds in which to make a getaway. Wisely, he used the few seconds in crawling under the saloon building.

Browder and the sheriff, Browder carrying a lighted lamp, hurried to the alley and began to look about them in vain.

"I was plum' shore I got him," la-

mented John Cleveland. "I shot low on purpose, Jeff."

"Yeah," half snarled Browder—"and missed clean. This hits me hard, John. I'd collected today on that bunch o' Herefords I sold last week, and that lousy stickup got every dollar of it!"

He swore luridly, and went back inside with the lamp. The officer, much disgruntled, followed him.

AFTER having lain hidden under the saloon building for more than two hours, Linster's head was clear, his strength once more normal. He crept out, safe in the darkness, and went to his horse; he'd left the animal in shadows cast by a spreading liveoak, on a vacant lot not far behind the Royal Straight. He still craved a smoke. But buying tobacco now entailed too great a risk, and he decided to forget it.

He was ready to swing himself into the saddle when his gaze fell upon the lighted dirty window of a lean-to that stood at the rear of the stage office. Eleazer Mott had quarters in that lean-to. Linster decided that he had important business to transact with Eleazer Mott. The old stage driver had been drinking heavily, and lay soddenly snoring. He was quite unaware of it when Tip lifted him, fully dressed, from his bed and carried him away in the night.

Upon waking at sunrise the next morning, Mott had not the faintest idea as to his whereabouts. He lay on a blanket on the earthen floor of an ancient cabin. There weren't any furnishings, save for the blanket. The door was closed; so was the window-shutter. The little light that filtered in through cracks seemed unearthly to him, in his hangover throes. A voice rang sepulchrally through the stark emptiness. Mott sat up and stared, and could see nobody.

He had gone a sickly ashen behind his scraggly beard. His reddened eyes seemed ready to pop. For he had recognized the voice as Tip Linster's, and Tip Linster was dead!

"Good mornin', Eleazer," a little louder this time.

Mott looked this way and that.

"Where are you, Tip?" he chattered.

"Right here, old-timer."

"I—I shore cain't see you!"

To him the voice had come from everywhere, and yet from nowhere. Tip was outside, peering through a small crack.

"Eleazer, you want to go on livin' and bein' reasonably happy?"

"Shore," promptly answered the old stage driver.

"All right. Then tell me the truth. What is it that you know about Jeff Browder that made him afraid to fire you without any pay?"

Linster had, of course, availed himself of the opportunity to eavesdrop that had been thrust upon him, just prior to his entering Browder's office by way of a window. Mott was badly muddled, and he was as superstitious as any Digger Indian, to begin with. The something within him that whispered warning whispered but weakly. And yet, he was silent.

TIP abandoned his hope to the effect that he would be able to frighten Mott into a confession, and played a better card.

"Listen, Eleazer. Jeff Browder is shore to have Ben Gantt or some other one o' his pet polecats do away with you to keep yore mouth shut. It's a wonder he ain't already done it. If a masked man shot you off the stage, the blame'd natchelly go to the mysterious new stickup; awful simple, that'd be. You tell me what I asked, and I'll give you my word to stand between you and Browder and his polecats as long as I'm able to set

gunpowder afire. Now, old-timer, talk fast!"

This bore fruit at once. Mott was badly shaken.

"I seen Jeff Browder shoot Henry Stanton down like a dawg," he said.

Linster's jaw dropped. "I thought Ben Gantt done that, Eleazer."

"No," said Mott. "But Ben seen it done. I was with him at his house on the creek, there east o' town, at the edge o' JB range. Jeff and Henry met in the road a little ways below the house, and talked a few minutes—me and Ben couldn't hear what they said—and all of suddent Jeff sneaked iron out o' leather and begun a-shootin'. Me and Ben hustled down there, and Jeff soon convinced me it'd be awful bad business for me to tell. But I never had nary thing to do with carryin' the body over to Dry Fork, where it was found. Nary thing."

Tip opened the door and walked in. Mott blinked at him.

"So you never got drowned a-tall, and it was you got the box—"

"Never mind," interrupted Linster. "If we save yore hide, old-timer, we got to keep you out o' sight awhile. Get up and come with me."

HE took Mott behind him on the black horse, and rode straight to headquarters of the Double S Ranch. Sam Stanton came out in response to Linster's halloo, heard all that the cowboy had to tell him, and was for riding to Sundog City with the avowed intention of shooting it out with Browder.

"It's the only way, Tip," he said wrathfully. "Mott bein' the only witness, the court wouldn't convict Jeff wo'th a cent. If there was a way o' makin' Ben Gantt swear to the truth —but there ain't."

"Oh, ain't there?" Tip laughed a hard laugh. "Mebbe there is, Sam. Anyhow, you stay out o' Sundog until you've heard from me again; you'll likely spoil a heap, if you don't. Eleazer here ain't apt to run off and leave you, but better keep a eye on him. Much obliged for all that grub and stuff. See you later, Sam."

He rode off rapidly.

Linster now had in the hidden strong-box the actual value of his little ranch in Browder money. But he didn't want money. He wanted the Tumbling L Bar, apple of his eye. In order to get the place back he would need more thousands of Browder dollars, and before long he had them.

HE held up Ben Gantt—stockily-built giant with pale-blue killer eyes like Jeff Browder's—and from him took the payrolls of the two big JB cow outfits; did it in broad daylight and without uttering a word to jeopardize his identity. After the excitement that followed this had begun to die, the unknown dark horseman rode to a side window of the Royal Straight Saloon, on a Saturday night, shot the lights out and within two more minutes had cleaned the cash register and was gone!

Sundog's big man stormed, swore, fumed at poor Sheriff John Cleveland unmercifully. Why, Cleveland hadn't even been able to find out what had become of old Eleazer Mott!

The raging Jeff offered a heavy reward for the capture of the dark horseman. It went unclaimed. Then there was a rumor, set going by Linster himself, that the strange bandit had transferred his depredations to another county.

Browder turned again to money-making. He rode for the Circle K Ranch with the intention of bidding on a pen of prize bulls, taking eighteen hundred dollars with him. Ben Gantt went along as guard. The two men turned a short curve in the scrub-lined trail and came suddenly upon a black hat lying top downward

in the dust. In the hat there was a square of white paper, on which had been printed boldly in pencil a six-word message.

"Put yore money in the hat!" Jeff read aloud, as he and Ben reined their horses to a halt with the dark headpiece between them.

Like an echo there came from the thick scrub a few yards ahead and to the right the menacing click of a gun-hammer. Gantt reached quickly for his low-slung Colt. There was a roar from the brush, and a bullet carried his Stetson away. His horse bolted frenziedly.

Browder would have followed his foreman and star henchman, had not the somberly-clad masked man appeared before him with still smoking six-gun leveled.

Into the black hat Jeff was soon dropping eighteen hundred dollars in banknotes. Back in Sundog City, an hour later, he proceeded to call John Cleveland everything but sheriff and gentleman.

That night Linster visited Sam Stanton. The two held a conversation of some length. On the next day, at Tip's suggestion, old Sam made it convenient to stop at the home of Ben Gantt, a little east of town.

STANTON walked into Browder's office in the rear of the saloon building, early that evening. He closed the door behind him, drew up a chair and sat down. Browder moved the desk lamp to put the light at his back, swung halfway around in his swivel-chair.

"Jeff," the cattleman began, "you've lost so much money lately that mebbe yo're in need o' ready cash. I'll give you fifteen thousand for the Tumblin' L Bar, Jeff."

Browder knew that the little outfit was worth nothing like that figure. Then he thought he understood, and he went a shade ashen. Sam Stanton was watching the big man closely, wisely.

"I got a deed here in my pocket, Jeff, ready for yore signature and witness signatures," said Stanton. "Plenty o' witness timber in the saloon. The money's inside o' my shirt. Want it?"

IN the other's right hand there had appeared as though by magic his double-action .38. The muzzle frowned into Stanton's lined old face. Browder's eyes were narrow and glittering.

"Don't try reaching for hardware, Sam," he said. "That's my money. Leave it here on my desk, and I won't kill you!"

Tip Linster had not feared this greatly, but he was ready for it. He stepped into view at the open alley window, his Colt level and clicking.

"Oh, I see," growled Browder, holstering his .38. "Tip, you certainly are smart. But you're not smart enough, young *hombre!*"

Linster realized with a jolt that in his haste to save old Stanton he hadn't thought to pull his neckerchief over his face!

"Better high-tail it," he said to Stanton. "I'll hold this polecat. Don't be uneasy, Sam. Nobody on earth can prove whose money that is."

The cattleman swore, rose and departed. Tip held Browder under his gun for a few minutes, then vanished into the darkness.

Tip was exceedingly blue now. He had failed. Well, there was one thing that he felt sure would not fail. Vengeance had little place in this. It was an inborn desire to see justice done. He stole swiftly to a window of Sheriff John Cleveland's office. Cleveland had gone home for the night.

Tip went hastily to the sheriff's house in the edge of town.

In response to a muffled halloo, the officer came to the front door. Light

from within illuminated Linster's countenance. He wore no mask.

"Tip!" gasped John Cleveland. There was relief in his voice. He hadn't felt right about killing the cowboy.

"Don't drag iron, John," Linster said. "If you do, I'm gone. Now listen. It was Jeff Browder who murdered Henry Stanton last May. Eleazer Mott, Ben Gantt, and Ben's wife seen the shootin'. You know what a good woman's oath means in court. Sally Gantt ain't afraid to swear contrary to Ben now; he's been so mean to her, she'll be glad to get rid of him. Sam Stanton just made it his business to find this out. You hustle Sally here to Miz Cleveland, where she'll have protection, and ask her questions. After you've got Browder in jail, you can ride out to the Double S for Eleazer Mott, who'll turn state's evidence. So long, John, and good luck!"

The night swallowed him. Two minutes later he heard the rapid hoof-beats of the sheriff's horse. Cleveland was embracing with avidity that which seemed a big chance to even scores with Jeff Browder, lately his persecutor.

TIP LINSTER was not of the sort that gives up easily. As he made his way through the friendly shadows and toward the little business section, he did some hard thinking. Then he had an idea that held promise. If only Sam Stanton hadn't started for home— But he had. Tip got his horse and rode a streak after Stanton, overtaking him a few miles out of town.

"I got a plan," said Linster. "Le's go back to Sundog."

Sheriff Cleveland found the slaving wife of Ben Gantt willing to be Mrs. Cleveland's guest temporarily, and willing to talk. Soon Jeff Browder was in a jail cell, a swearing, raging prisoner. A crowd was gathering fast in the semi-dark street before the squat building that housed both jail and sheriff's office. Cleveland hadn't been able to find Ben Gantt.

Stanton and Linster were watching from the darkness. Suddenly Tip nudged old Sam, and muttered:

"Now's the time, I think."

THE elderly cattleman made his way into the squat building, asked Cleveland for and received permission to speak privately with Browder, and a minute afterward stood at a barred door peering into the new prisoner's ashen face. Linster had crept into the darkness behind the cell, and stood watching through a small, barred window.

"You'll mebbe need some ready cash now, Jeff," half whispered Stanton. "Mebbe fifteen thousand would make Sally Gantt change her mind about what she told Cleveland."

Browder glared silently. A heavy form had just crept up to the cell window outside, passing within a few feet of the now hidden Linster. It was Ben Gantt, and he'd overheard Sam Stanton.

Gantt whispered through to Browder:

"I shore believe Sally will fall for that, Jeff. Get the money for me, and I'll manage to see her."

"But I haven't got fifteen thousand in ready cash, unless I sell the Tumbling L Bar for money that's already mine!" exclaimed Browder, his voice low.

"Well, that's better'n hangin', ain't it?" rumbled the big man's chief henchman.

In the sheerest desperation, Browder turned back to Stanton at the barred door.

"We'll trade, Sam," he agreed.

Stanton hurried down the corridor, and shortly afterward came back with John Cleveland and a deputy, for witnesses. The deal went through

very quickly. Then old Sam lifted his voice:

"All right, Tip! You can come in now!"

Linster entered the jail corridor by way of the back door, and he brought Ben Gantt in with him. Ben wilted almost before a cell-door key had been turned upon him—wanted to turn state's evidence and save his own hide—and soon had told exactly the story that his wife had told a little while before! Browder almost choked.

Cleveland turned inquiring eyes upon Tip. Tip grinned at him.

"There's nobody to prosecute me, John," he said. "You see, Browder signed the deed without readin' it—like I done one time! The paper has got a clause, a consideration, which I put in extry; it says that Jeff hereby exonerates Tipton Linster of all blame and indebtedness, of whatever nature, and states that he's shore Tipton Linster had nothin' to do with any stickup business here or anywhere else, at any time!"

Browder in his cell overheard that, and choked yet again in his helpless rage. A deputy returned from the Double S with old Eleazer Mott, whose story of the Henry Stanton killing was identical with that of the two Gantts. John Cleveland faced Linster and put out a hand, and Linster grasped it.

"Jeff's shore to hang, Tip," said the fat sheriff. "His influence is gone, and no jury would find you guilty o' anything even if you was to be tried, and I'm mighty glad of it. Sam will deed the little ranch back to you, eh?"

It was then that Sam Stanton delivered to Linster with a flourish a folded paper that he had all ready.

"There, John," he said, "goes the Tumblin' L Bar back to the young *hombre* who registered the brand. Well, Tip, I got a jug out home, and we've earned the right to jubilate a little, tiny, bitsey bit; now ain't we, boy?"

"You said it," Linster answered, with a grin. "Let's go!"

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SNAKEBITE

"Safer to rub him out now," grunted Fox.

Clem Hawkins Was the Only Citizen of the Little Ghost Town—and When Three Bad Men Came Along, It Looked Like He Was Licked!

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Author of "Extra Freight," "That Gilsum Guy," etc.

"HOWDEE, strangers!"

Clem Hawkins, Snakebite's lone citizen, sang out the greeting as three men galloped up the empty street of the sun-parched desert ghost town and reined to a halt in front of him.

With a shift of his shoulders Ed Hall swung off his sorrel mare. The Dakin brothers followed his lead. As if by preconcerted signal, the three whipped out revolvers and crowded around the old man.

"Listen, you," grated Fox Dakin. "You got company, see. For a while anyhow. We're gonna' stay here

three, four weeks maybe—because we like the scenery."

"Why, go right ahead fellers." Clem's brow wrinkled. "That ain't no call to stampede a man like you done, and pull a gun on him. You got a whole city full o' empty houses to camp in."

"Naw, you don't get the idea," continued Fox. "We ain't got any too much grub, and we thought you'd crave to be sociable and loan us some."

"Aw, quit kiddin' the scrawny-necked old buzzard," cut in Joe Dakin. "Knock him off, and ferget him. Dead guys is lousy tale-bearers."

SWEAT beads formed suddenly on the little desert rat's forehead. Like a frightened rabbit he looked first at one of the intruders, then another. In the eyes of all three he read nothing but cunning, cruelty and evil.

"I got a better hunch," laughed Ed Hall. "Let's save this old mud turtle a while. He can cook for us. I always figured I'd like to have me a private 'valay'."

Joe Dakin grinned. "Sure, we can have fun with him. And we won't have nothin' to do like washin' dishes or nothin'. We can watch he don't give us the slip easy enough."

"Safer to rub him out now," grunted Fox.

While Clem waited tremblingly before them, the three killers discussed his fate as impersonally as if they were talking about the price of eggs in Boston. They decided to retain Hawkins for the time being.

Hawkins was angry, rather than grateful. Suddenly a thought crossed his mind. He left it unvoiced.

No use telling the visitors he hadn't enough food for three guests, if they intended staying any length of time. Nor was there any way to get it without going back across the desert to Gopher City, thirty miles away.

"Okay, it's settled." Fox Dakin spoke not to Clem, but to his comrades.

"I ain't a-goin' to be nobody's servant," blurted Clem in sudden desperate defiance.

"Gettin' choosey, huh." Joe Dakin drew back his left fist menacingly.

Joe was the bully of the trio. He enjoyed the feel and sound of fist on flesh. His fist on somebody else's flesh. And it didn't spoil his pleasure if the other fellow was tied up, or too small, or too old, to fight back either.

Clem raised an arm to ward off the blow. Before Joe's fist launched forward, Fox stepped in front of him.

"Why sock the dizzy coot? He's going to do what he's told, and like it." He turned to Clem. "Ain't you, you old billy goat?"

Clem nodded slowly. His spark of rebellion had sputtered out. He knew when he was licked, and he sensed that of the three outlaws, Fox Dakin, the oily-voiced, shifty-eyed, cold-blooded killer, was the most to be feared, the most deadly.

Ed Hall lit a cigarette and smiled.

"Well, any time cookie gets troublesome," he drawled, "lighted butts burn a mean hole in the soles of a guy's feet."

CLEM shivered slightly. But he cooked for his captors, waited on them hand and foot. Clem's weapons were taken away from him. He was never allowed to go for water or brushwood unless one of the outlaws accompanied him.

At night he was made to sleep on the floor, his hands roped securely behind his back, and the other end of the rope Fox Dakin fastened around his own waist.

The trio were taking no chances on having their prisoner escape to make his way to Gopher City and apprise the authorities of their new and perfect hideout.

During the daytime one of the

Dakins or Ed Hall was constantly on guard as a lookout on the little hill that rose behind the ancient mining town. The position commanded a wide sweep of the flat desert below. Anyone approaching Snakebite afoot or on horseback could be easily spotted while he was yet miles away.

FOR a week the fugitives bullied and cursed old man Hawkins. They made fun of his mild blue eyes, the mat of straggly grey whiskers that covered his nervous, twitching face, and of the grotesquely patched, ill-fitting clothes that he wore.

They seemed to derive some sort of fiendish glee out of making the thin little prospector's life, or at least what part of it remained, as miserable and uncomfortable as possible. They planned to kill him before they left Snakebite, and they reminded him of it every chance they got.

Clem couldn't fight back. He never had been much of a fighter anyhow. Too small. The other fellows always bowled him over with the first smack. But maybe that was because the people Clem tackled had always been about three times his size, height and weight.

At first Clem only wanted to escape from his captors, to get away from Snakebite and leave it in possession of the outlaws. Later he wanted to stay. He had no thought of running away. All he desired was a chance, just one chance, to even the score with his tormentors.

He explained about his slender food supply. The outlaws laughed. Yet within a few days over the week they had literally eaten the old prospector out of house and home.

"Let's blow before we starve to death," growled Joe. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Yeah?" queried Fox Dakin. "You birds figure how we're gonna' travel since Ed lost the bankroll gamblin' that we took offa' the Gopher City stage." He paused. "I'm with you, though, if you can dope out a way. We could lay over at Curley's ranch in Arizona, if we could make the state line. This damn desert's gettin' on my nerves, too."

"You and me both," assented Hall. Abruptly his tone changed. A new, dangerous light flashed in his eyes. "I got it," he exclaimed loudly. "I bet old Twinkle-Toes here has got a fat poke salted away somewhere. Let's ask him." He laughed. "Anyhow, the turkey-necked old fool can't take it with him—where he's goin'."

"We could leave tonight," put in Joe.

"Sure." Fox Dakin turned to Clem.

But Hawkins, though his lips trembled and his hands shook, declared he had neither gold nor money cached anywhere.

"You're lyin'," snarled Fox. "Come clean, or I'll let Ed work on you."

Ed Hall smiled.

"We're wastin' time talkin'," he said. "Gimme that poker. I'll have a red-hot fire in the stove in a couple o' minutes."

Clem's lips went dry; his face blanched as Ed began making his preparations. His heart pounded wildly. If they found his life's savings they'd leave. Leave before he had his chance to even the bitter score. He looked about him distractedly.

ED pulled the poker out of the coals. It's tip was white hot as he held it up and glanced over at Clem.

Terror burned in the little man's eyes. His shoulders sagged.

"It's—it's under the floor of the jail," he murmured weakly. "Just a couple of pokes of yellow gold. I—I bin savin' up for—"

"Shut up," snapped Fox. "What do we care what you bin savin' it up for. Show us where it is, and make it snappy. We ain't got all night."

Like a man leading his own fu-

neral procession, Clem led the outlaws to the wooden jail that had once housed Snakebite's lawbreakers.

"The gold is under that plank with the loose end," he said slowly.

He pointed towards the center of the floor, as Fox Dakin lifted the lantern above his head to throw a better light about the building.

"Which one?" snapped Ed Hall.

Clem, shivering with pent-up emotion, moved across the room. He bent down, tried to dig his lean fingers into a crack in the stout plank floor and lift. Joe Dakin bent over to add his strength. But the board was apparently stuck fast. It refused to budge.

"I'LL get a pry," said Clem dejectedly. There's an old length o' drill steel leanin' against the back o' the jail. I used it before."

"Make it snappy," urged Ed.

The three worked on the floor board, avarice streaming from their eager, cruel eyes. Temporarily they discounted Clem. They had become accustomed to the old man's apparently cringing docility.

Clem stepped out into the moonlight. There was a sudden suspicious briskness in his step. Save for the door from which he had made his exit, the jail was securely locked.

Clem Hawkins glanced behind him once. Fox Dakin still held the lantern. The other two struggled with the floor board.

Using every last ounce of his strength, Clem swung the heavy oak door shut with a bang. He picked up a loose stone and hammered home the rusty bolt.

With a shout of rage Fox Dakin and his companions rushed for the door. Too late, they realized what had happened. They stormed; they cursed; they threatened. But they received no answer. Everything seemed quiet outside. Ghastly quiet, still as death.

Fox Dakin moved over to one of the barred windows and peered. A new exclamation and another curse burst from his lips. What he saw in the moonlight was a hatless old man astride a flop-eared burro trotting gaily out of a tumble-down structure across the street.

The windows in the building were broken, and over the ancient door that creaked crazily on one hinge was the still decipherable legend: "Snakebite Security Bank."

Fox Dakin saw the two saddlebags that weighted the burro down, and he reached swiftly for the gun at his hip. His face was a vision of mottled rage as his hand came back empty. He had left his gun-belt back at Hawkins' camp.

"Joe! Ed!" he shouted. "Gimme' a shootin' iron—quick!"

BUT Fox was too late, Clem Hawkins turned the corner a split second ahead of the deafening fusillade of bullets that rained up the street.

Five minutes later he was heading out across the desert towards Gopher City and help. He was still astride the burro. One hand gripped the bridle reins of the outlaws' horses.

"Danged fools," the old man mumbled to his mount as Snakebite dropped from view. "They ought to of known a bank is the right place to keep money in. Giddap, Beauty!"

In Next Month's Gala Fiction Rodeo of THRILLING WESTERN—

Russell A. Bankson, Ray Humphreys, F. N. Litten, Dabney Otis Collins and Other Top-Hand Western Writers

A Magpie Talks

"Put 'em up—you, Dale!"

Dude Kohler Was Found Dead on the Thompson Gulch Trail—and They All Thought Terry Dale Was the Killer!

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Author of "Rodeo Spoils," "The Blue-Eyed Kid," etc.

TERRY DALE came thrashing into Conifer on his foam-flecked roan—riding fast and reckless even for him, daredevil that he was! He pulled the roan up with a whirlwind of dust right in front of the Pine Hotel.

He leaned from his saddle, ex-

citedly, and spoke hurriedly to the group of cowmen lounging there in the shade—that is, he seemed to speak to the group, but his quick eyes had narrowed out the man with the silver star on his vest—Sheriff Johnny McLachlan—and it was really to him that Terry addressed his thunderous news.

"Dude Kohler's dead—up Thompson Gulch trail!"

IT was just as if the trembling Terry had tossed a Fourth of July firecracker up there on the Pine Hotel porch. There was a mêlée of scraping, thudding feet, a commotion of chairs, wild, incredulous stares.

Sheriff Johnny was the first to find his voice.

"Dead, you say, Terry?" he cried. "What happened?"

But if the sheriff expected Terry Dale to say what half of the other men expected Terry to say he was disappointed.

"He's shot, Johnny—*but I don't know anything about it!*"

There was then just the briefest split-second of silence. Then came a rising murmur that grew louder and more ominous—like the storm wind sweeping Wild Horse Mesa.

Dude Kohler dead, eh? And this whippersnapper Terry Dale bringing in the sad news, eh? And with everybody in Conifer knowing that Dude Kohler and Terry Dale had been enemies for years!

Say, what sort of a fool was this Dale kid, anyway—or what sort of asses did he take the men on the porch to be, eh? Huh—it was as plain as the nose on a man's face that—

But Sheriff Johnny, who had the reputation of being a pretty fast thinker under the worst of circumstances, jumped in with another quick question—one he hoped might check the brewing storm.

"Accident, maybe, Terry?"

But Terry shook his head. He sat there on his blowing horse looking rather sadly at the group of men his announcement had so swiftly changed into a group of near-maniacs.

But of course, it was happening just as he had expected. He knew when he had started for Conifer that he was putting his feet right into quicksand. But he had come anyway—foolishly, perhaps—but he had come.

"Sheriff—all I know is this," he said, trying to calm his voice because he knew the whole world was listening. "I came riding down from my place—very slow—because the trail is muddy after the big rain.

"I saw horse tracks in the mud as I went. Then I come upon Dude Kohler stretched out in the said mud with a big hole in his forehead. I got off, saw he was a dead one, and came on—"

Growls and rumblings from the crowd again. But Sheriff Johnny was smiling. He figured he was reading the truth in Terry's face.

"See his horse around—or any tracks of another horse?"

"No, sir! I saw where his horse run off into the timber. But I saw no sign of any other horse—or man!"

THERE was a general exchange of winks and nods and smiles.

Grandpa Cuddy, who had once served a year as a cattle association sleuth and who prided himself on his abruptness, cut in:

"What made you kill him, Dale?"

But the stabbing question didn't noticeably jar Terry.

"I said I didn't kill him!" he answered unhappily. "I know nothing about it. I just come across his body—"

"And you and him enemies?" sneered Grandpa Cuddy.

Again Sheriff Johnny spoke up, authoritatively.

"Come on, Terry. You lead us to the body. Somebody go get Coroner Eddie Owens. Tell him to bring his buckboard. The rest of you—"

The sheriff ended with a shrug. No need, he knew, to issue any special invitations. Every man in the group would go, many with drastic ideas in their heads.

"Wait until I get my mare!" cried Grandpa Cuddy. Then he added, sotto voce, "I've never missed a lynching."

LYNCHING! Terry paled. Sheriff Johnny glanced quickly around. Yes, there was Doc SeCheverell. He could trust him.

"Oh, Doc," called the sheriff softly. "I wish you'd ride alongside Terry and me—just for company. I'm deputizing you for the afternoon, Doc. I'll expect you to stick with—"

Doc SeCheverell patted twin holsters.

"I don't carry two rods for nothing," he remarked crisply.

So they started without further ceremony—Sheriff Johnny, Terry in the center, Doc SeCheverell next. Behind trooped the others—many of their faces craped with black looks—such men as "Wild Max" Hill and Bill Beardshear and "Horry" Stewart and Red Feeney and "Smiling 'Gene" Lindberg—except that he wasn't smiling. "Dusty" Chapin whirled a rope rather suggestively.

But Terry rode head up and shoulders squared and eyes straight ahead. There was nothing at all surprising about all this, after all. He had foreseen it all. He had known that he would be accused as a matter of course.

The thought, when it had first struck him up the trail as he had leaned over the lifeless form of Dude Kohler, had terrified him—but only momentarily. He had reasoned it all out.

If he had fled or hidden, the hue and cry would be on his heels anyway. By coming in and reporting his gruesome discovery, he stood one chance in a hundred of convincing someone—probably Sheriff Johnny—of his innocence.

He turned suddenly to the sheriff.

"You know I didn't kill Dude," he said breathlessly.

"I hardly think you did," said the sheriff, frankly. "But you'd better pray we find out who did when we get up here—or otherwise Doc and I may have our hands full preventing a—a—"

"I understand," nodded Terry. Instinctively his fingers went to his shirt collar. It seemed to be choking him.

A bay mare came abreast with old Grandpa Cuddy.

"Looks bad for you, Dale," squeaked Grandpa. "There was bad blood between you two. Dude accused you last May of being a calf stealer—"

Terry answered with polite dignity.

"I proved him a liar!"

"Well, the jury believed you rather than him," admitted Grandpa, grudgingly. "I ain't forgot the day you hit him on the chin, either—"

"He tried to steal my girl!"

"Yeah—so you said," cackled Grandpa Cuddy. "Then you and him had a lawsuit over some land—"

"I beat him in court that time, too!" answered Terry, wearily.

"Yeah, but—"

SHERIFF JOHNNY turned on Grandpa Cuddy with a show of exasperation.

He said something low and significant and Grandpa Cuddy, with a pained look, fell back. Doc SeCheverell muttered savagely.

But Terry seemed not to heed. He was running back over his stormy career with the man now dead. It had all started when he had moved onto a homestead up Thompson

Gulch where the eccentric Kohler ran his cattle.

Kohler didn't want neighbors. He had started talk about Terry and had even gone to the extent of attempting to "frame" him on rustling charges. Then he had tried to poison Valerie Leonard against Terry. Finally he had gone to law with Terry over the homestead.

ALOUD, as if to himself, Terry said:

"He was always promising to get me!"

"I know it," said the sheriff kindly. "Everyone knows it. But Kohler was an old-timer in these parts. He had friends—"

"A lot of his friends ride with us today," added Doc SeCheverell pointedly—and Terry put his fingers to his shirt collar again.

* * * * *

There was no doubt about it at all—Dude Kohler was dead.

"Yeah," nodded Coroner Eddie Owens, bending over the corpse in the trail. "Dude's been dead—well—couple of hours, anyway!"

The hatless men waited—and stared.

"Just the one wound?" asked Sheriff Johnny McLachlan quietly.

"Yeah—right through the forehead—fatal as heck!" said Owens.

"What kind of caliber, Eddie?"

"Oh, kind of off-hand I'd say a .38," replied the coroner, not looking up. A lot of eyes went straight to Terry's holster, however. Sure, he carried a .38 caliber gun! The sheriff had taken the precaution to note that on the way out.

Now to get hold of that gun, thought Grandpa Cuddy, eagerly—but again Sheriff Johnny was a bit too quick for him.

"Let me see your weapon, Terry," he requested.

The gun came out promptly. The sheriff examined it. As he had expected it was fully loaded. He sniffed at it speculatively.

"Use it lately, Terry?"

"Yes—shot at a bobcat this morning."

The sheriff, to the astonishment of Grandpa Cuddy and some of his hot-headed cronies, returned the gun—still loaded—to Terry.

"Move the body, Mr. Coroner, and let's see if there is anything under it," suggested the sheriff. But there was nothing. The coroner, assisted by Doc SeCheverell, began to search the body.

"Look around for an empty cartridge, boys," invited the sheriff, stepping down off his horse into the mud. The sheriff had already noticed what all of the riders had noticed—that there were no prints in the mud except the prints that had been made by Terry's horse on the way down and by Terry as he examined the body. The coroner looked closer at the dead man's face.

"Might be powder burns here," he remarked.

"COULD be suicide," said Sheriff McLachlan evenly, and no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Grandpa Cuddy let out a weird yell.

"Well—where's the gun if it's suicide?"

Men and horses pressed forward, threateningly. Doc SeCheverell, taking a folded slip of paper from the dead man's vest pocket, read and whistled.

Then, with a guilty look he hastily folded the paper and tried to slip it, surreptitiously, to Sheriff Johnny—but Max Hill had good eyes. He spoke up briskly:

"Read it to all of us, Sheriff!"

So Sheriff Johnny read aloud:

If anything happens to me blame Terry Dale. He did this.

Dude Kohler.

It was like an accusing voice from

the grave. Terry blanched in spite of himself. A triumphant cackle from Grandpa Cuddy.

"Suicide! Heck! He did it! Dude says he did it!"

"Dude was a little premature, maybe," said Sheriff Johnny coldly. "It's a cinch he never wrote this note *after* he was shot. I'm still—"

The crowd pushed forward.

"We aim on justice," said Hill. "This punk never gave Dude any time to pray before bumping him off! But we'll give the punk time for him to pray! We're taking Dale, Sheriff!"

"No, you ain't!" said Sheriff Johnny swiftly. "I'm arresting him—he's my prisoner—hey, Doc!"

BUT Doc, starting up from where he had been crouched over the body, found himself looking into the ugly muzzle of a steadily held six-shooter. He had no chance to go for his twin guns.

A quick hand yanked the sheriff's gun from its holster.

"Put 'em up—you, Dale!" came the hoarse shout.

Terry put them up obediently. There was nothing else to do under the circumstances. His gun was snatched from the holster. Quicker than a wink a noosed rope was slapped over his head. Grandpa Cuddy was laughing childishly.

"We'll have a right good hanging!" he said.

"Listen!" cried the sheriff, wiggling in the arms of two men who were holding him. "He's my prisoner. You can't take him—"

"We have!"

"You'll be charged with murder yourselves if—"

"Okay. Charge us!"

They closed in around Terry—all except six or seven of them, including the man covering Doc SeCheverell and the pair holding the sheriff. Four men stood back, apparently against the idea of a lynching bee. Sheriff Johnny took heart.

"Listen, fellows!" he shouted. "I'll deal with you! All I ask is a little time to investigate this further! Dude Kohler, even if he is dead, wasn't no saint. He must have had a lot of enemies. This boy Dale isn't proven guilty. Would a guilty man come in to tell us about this killing? I say—"

"A fool might!" suggested Grandpa Cuddy.

"Give me a little time, boys!" begged Sheriff Johnny, and one of the four men who hadn't joined in the demonstration backed him up. "Yes," agreed this man, "give Johnny a little time!"

Max Hill cooled down a bit.

"How much time you want, Johnny?"

"Oh," parried the sheriff, "a day or two."

"Nothing doing! What do you need time for, anyway?"

"I'm still convinced that maybe this isn't murder!" cried the sheriff. "Coroner Owens says there're powder burns on Dude's forehead. It isn't likely he let any man come up close to shoot him—and besides, you boys ain't noticed that Dude's gun is gone!"

Several of the mob grunted. No, they hadn't noticed that.

"I WANT time to look for a gun, boys," pleaded Sheriff Johnny. "Give me time before you take a life. We'll never be able to hold our heads up again if—"

"One hour!" said Max Hill suddenly. He swung to Terry. "You can use it praying, fellow!" Hill looked at Stewart. "You guard the back trail. Nobody comes up, see—unless they're with us—willing to see justice done. Understand?"

An hour! The sheriff felt himself trembling in his boots. What could he do in an hour? He was sure

that Terry was innocent, but how could he prove it in an hour? Hopeless! He had but one slim chance. If he could find the gun! If it wasn't murder—

He wrenched himself free.

"Surrender your guns and come on and help me, Doc!" he ordered. "We got to find that gun. If this was accidental—or suicide—Dude couldn't throw the gun into the next county!"

Doc released, edged over.

"That note makes it look bad!"

"Sure," nodded the sheriff. "But the note could be wrong, too. We got to find that gun!"

TERRY looked up at the sun. It was going down fast. An hour would be sunset, almost. He noticed the magpies in the trees, scolding at the interruption of their afternoon solitude. Hill caught the look.

"Last sun you'll ever see set, murderer!" he rasped out. "And them magpies will have a scarecrow for company tonight."

Sheriff Johnny, kicking through the underbrush near Dude's body, looked up, a queer expression on his face.

"Doc," he said to SeCheverell, "Dude was kind of funny about a lot of things, wasn't he? He was interested in magpies, wasn't he?"

Doc SeCheverell nodded gloomily.

"Yeah—he was always splitting tongues of young magpies to make them talk," said Dock. "He was cruel with critters generally!"

The sheriff's eyes narrowed as his gaze swept the low trees. "A lot of magpies here," he said slowly.

Grandpa Cuddy, aglow with anticipation, laughed shrilly.

"You think maybe one of them magpies might talk and give testimony for the murderer?" he asked. The mob laughed mirthlessly.

The sheriff didn't even bother to answer the sally. Instead he called to the four men who hadn't been so eager to string up Terry.

"Hey, McMeel, Neville, Reef—and Cervi!" he called. "You boys are young and limber. I'm investigating these trees along here for the gun. I want you to help me. Come on!"

Max Hill took up Grandpa Cuddy's joke. "He's looking for a magpie that talks!" he shouted. "Well, you boys go ahead and help him. He ain't got a lot of time. But if you do locate a talking magpie I'm betting my saddle against a pine cone that the danged bird will say Dale here did the killing!"

Terry, standing with his back against a tree, the noose still around his neck, looked at the sheriff in wonder. What good could come of poking around in the trees?

There could be no help, no rescue. If others did arrive from Conifer they'd undoubtedly join Hill, Stewart and Cuddy. No, he had best begin to pray, as his self-appointed judges had advised.

PRAY! Yes, he'd pray—innocent as he was. He bowed his head.

The mob waited silently. It would be rude to interrupt a man at his last prayers. But they watched Sheriff Johnny and Doc SeCheverell and the four men that had gone to their assistance. The six were poking here and there through the dense foliage of the trees, arousing the indignant magpies to greater outcry.

Grandpa Cuddy was frowning and clicking his store teeth.

"What in Sam Hill can Johnny be up to," he mused angrily. "He ain't silly enough to be trying to find a magpie as could talk! If one did it would talk Dale's life away, anyway!"

He pulled out his big watch and sighed. "Forty minutes yet—before the show."

Ten of the minutes passed. Terry, head still bowed, had finished the

simple prayers he knew. He was thinking now of his mother, back in a middle-western state, and of Valerie, the girl he courted in Conifer. Luckily, she wouldn't know until it was all over. But what grief would be hers when she did hear how he had died—lynched, as a murderer!

AND there would be none to say the mob was wrong. The sheriff might try to say so, but he would be booed down. Dude's note—

"He framed me, sure!" he told himself repeatedly.

Ten more minutes passed—and ten more on top of that. Terry lifted his white face to see what Sheriff Johnny was doing and Max Hill took the move as an indication that Terry was through with his prayers.

"Okay, Sheriff!" called Max. "You got ten minutes left."

"You'd better find that talking magpie in a hurry!" added Grandpa Cuddy, maliciously. And there was a laugh. But it quickly subsided when Sheriff Johnny, from a distant tree, called back:

"I've found my talking magpie!"

There was triumph in his voice—unmistakable triumph—and it nettled Hill. He ran forward, followed by everyone except the man who was guarding Terry. The youth's heart leaped for joy. But it must be a joke! A talking magpie? What help could it be if it was true?

"Sure," said Sheriff Johnny, clamboring out of the low-branched tree. "My hunch was right, men. I found a magpie that talks—look!"

He held up an exhausted, sorry-looking young bird by one wing. From a leg dangled a piece of cord. And on the end of the cord was a gun. Eyes stared at it unbelievingly.

"Know that gun, Hill? Chapin? Beardshear?"

"That's Dude's gun!" exclaimed Beardshear.

"Of course—the special light weight gun he toted," said Sheriff Johnny loudly. "Dale didn't kill him. Dude killed himself and had the magpie tied to the gun so it would fly away and remove the evidence. Seeing Dude died on this road, near Terry's place, and with the note he left accusing Terry, he knew that we'd accuse Terry—but fortunately the magpie got caught in the branches!"

Hill swore under his breath. Immediately his whole countenance changed.

"Say, Sheriff, you're too smart! It ain't logical for a man to kill himself just to spite another feller. Maybe Dale told you to look for a hung-up magpie in the trees. Maybe he fixed that bird that way purposely. You ain't found a *talking* magpie, after all."

NOW the smile broadened on Sheriff Johnny's face.

"Oh, yes, I did," he grinned. "We all know how Dude was sort of boastful like. Well, he even had to brag about this!" The sheriff opened his other hand showing a roll of heavy paper. "I discovered this tied to the gun and read it before I announced my find."

"What is it?" demanded Grandpa Cuddy.

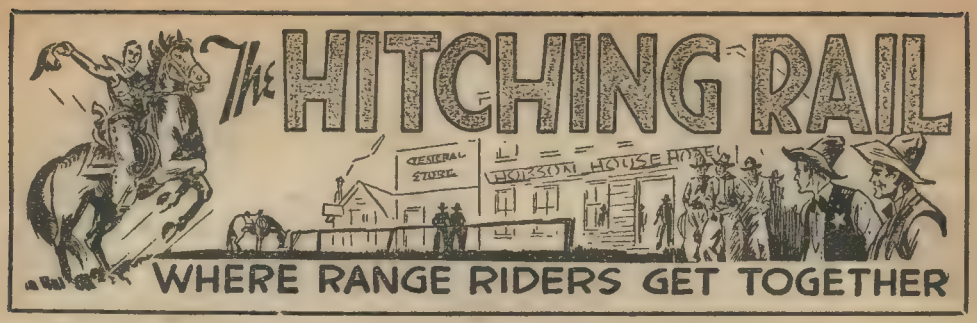
"A note from Dude," said the sheriff. "You'll all agree that it's Dude's writing and signature. He didn't expect it to be found for years, perhaps, but—I'll read it aloud:

By the time this is found—if ever—Terry Dale will have paid for something he didn't do. I'm cashing in my own chips, and if you look on the other side of this paper you will understand why. It took them years to find me. The game is up and I'm not facing a noose. The joke is on that rat Terry, he will hang for my murder.

Duke Kohler.

"What's on the other side of that

(Concluded on page 126)



FOLKS, HOLA ag'in! Betcha yuh got them ol' flannels on, these days. I shore hope so.

Me, I'm wearin' red ones, like I allers hev done sinct I war knee high tuh a week old, bawlin' calf. Boss, he eyes my wrists, whar th' red shows, an' plumb sniggers; but me, I knows how tuh keep my ol' blood aflowin' right.

It's My Bones, Savvy?

An' his blondie secretary, she oggles me plumb chucklin', an' her wearin' one o' them sawed-off dresses what'd gimme th' rheumatiz aches afore night. Pokes 'er durned pretty li'l nose to'ards th' ceilin' an' sweeps past my desk like she war sniffin' gold outa th' clouds. Well, it's *my* bones, not her'n.

Next time she comes slidin' my way, lunch hour, an' says, all smiles, "Uncle Buck, tell us another yarn 'bout them cowfolks—please!" Me, I'll just shore sit solid an' jerk my brows sorta over my orbs an' give 'er back one o' them durned sniffs, like I'd sit on a cactus sudden like. An' I go on achawin' my hot-dawgs like she warn't inside a thousand miles o' nowhar. That'll tuck 'er up, I betcha!

But Don't Get Me Wrong!

But say, fellas, don't git me wrong 'bout Blondie. She's shore a eyeful; an' sweet? Say, ain't no peach ever on a tree what could match 'er cheeks, nor no blue sky, with all them li'l floatin' clouds o' dainty white, what kin match her eyes. Me, they shore look plumb through me, ev'y time. Ef I war jest 'bout twenty year younger—

Hell, th' boss is yowlin' ag'in, scowlin' 'crost at me like this warn't Christmas month an' ev'ybody's expected tuh smile. Now he's sayin' suthin' again, eyin' me solemn; says I gotta quit this yere scrawlin' all my thoughts 'crost paper he has tuh buy; says "Go on, yuh durned ol' bronc-peeler, an' write somethin'. We gotta answer all these letters, while yuh just sits there a-dreamin' 'bout blizzards an' cow-herds snowed in, 'way out in yore white-face country ain't nobody kin live in these days."

Yere's th' Top o' th' Pile

Well, 'spect he's gotta have it his own durned way. So, yere's clawin' from th' top o' th' pile. Ike Saler comes fust, from up Detroit way. Say, Ike, how'd yuh ever keep warm, up thar whar th' blizzards'd choke a whole herd an' make a fella go round wearin' gunny sacks roped over his feet? Ike's shore ast a funny question, folks. One nobody else ain't ast since I war workin' strays in Wyomin', just sech a winter, colder 'n' all git-out an' then some.

Well, Ike, mebbe I kin tell yuh. Yuh wants tuh know 'bout what we fellas calls "Water witches," an' ef it's jest all blooey.

They's Sure Truth in 'Em

Son, I'd shore like squattin' down 'longside a chuck-waggin an' spill yuh a heap o' info. They's shore real truth in them water witches, Ikey boy. I knows, fer I seen 'em with my own eyes and wasn't believin' in 'em a durned bit. First off, what's a water witch. Well, it's a li'l piece o' copper wire 'bout four feet long. Yuh bends it intuh an inverted "Y," point up. Then yuh crooks th' two lower ends horizontal, each crook 'bout four inches long, as long as th' palm o' yore hand.

Then yuh grips them tw crooks, holdin' th' p'int up'ards like I says, an' then yuh starts slow walkin' to'wards whar yuh thinks they'd oughta be water under th' ground.

Believe It or Not

Now comes whut I done seen myself, believe it or not, so that Ripley fella says. Ef they's water under that ground, th' top o' th' water witch'll start turnin' downward, an' son, as yuh goes on walkin', grippin' them two crooks, th' p'int o' yore "Y" will shore pull downwards, till yuh cain't most keep holt o' them two crooks.

Up in Colorado fella comes along sayin' he war a water witch. Ev'ybody give 'im

(Continued on page 122)

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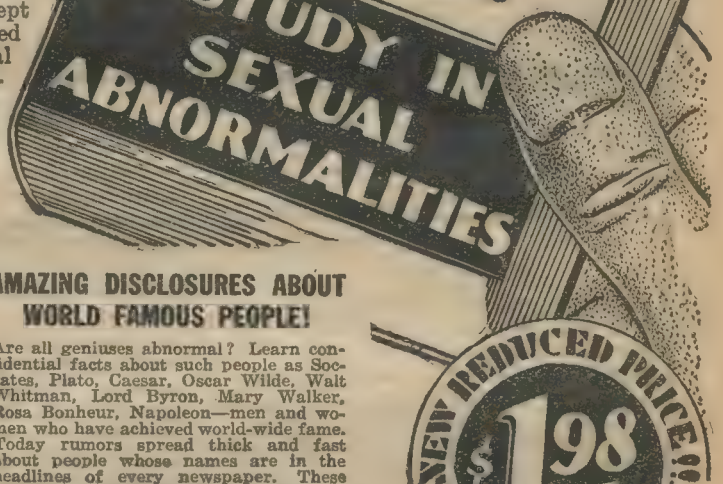

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It's GREAT to have the zest for fullest enjoyment of living! Don't feel or act old before your time! Life's richest gifts: Health, Success, Love, Popularity, come to MEN and WOMEN who are PHYSICALLY and MENTALLY Fit. If you are RUN-DOWN, "under par" and lack fullest abundance of your normal powers; if discouraged or lack of joyful interest in LIFE—then try PRINCESS ANNE STIMULATORS. Astonished users report great benefits! For Men and Women of all ages. Results positively guaranteed or money refunded! Designed for powerful, wholesome stimulation, yet absolutely safe, harmless, containing nothing habit-forming. Price: Regular $2.00 (C. O. D. $2.15). Special Formula, containing a gland ingredient, designed to quickly tone up weak organs, $3.00. PRINCESS ANNE CO., Dept. TF-12, Baltimore, Md. [(C) P. A. Co. 1934]

(Continued from page 120)

th' merry hooraw. Says he, "Tell yuh whut, folks. I'll guarantee thisaway. Ef I don't find water, yuh needn't pay me a cent. Ef I does strike water, yuh digs up a dollar a foot, cash, fer each foot o' depth. An' whut's more, I'll even tell yuh 'bout how deep I'll hev tuh dig."

Two Dollars a Foot!

One ranch-owner what was wantin' water shore bad, speaks quick. "Ef yuh strikes water, *hombre*," he says, "I'll pay yuh two dollars a foot, spot cash."

So that water witch fella grins, uses his durned water witch wire and then stops over a spot an' says, "Right yere, an' 'bout fifty foot down." We all gives 'im th' snootin' giggle, pronto.

He only smiles an' goes tuh work with his diggin' machine—an' up comes fresh, clear water, at forty-nine foot eight inches, shore's I'm a livin' example o' whut pipe-smokin' kin do tuh a good man.

Seven Colorady Wells

Fellas an' gals, an' Ike what's ast th' question, that fella dug seven wells up there in southern Colorady, usin' his durned wire, an' he brung in all seven, good an' worth real *dinero*.

'Nother time, last summer, a water witch fella showed up down in my country, New Mexico, an' claimed th' same thing. Fella named Wilson took 'im up, wanted a good well. I war right thar, folks, believe it or not. That *hombre* shore located real agua, an' that well's pushin' up good water right this minute. Funny thing, 'bout them water witches—works fer some an' not a-tall fer others.

Nuthin' Doin' fer Some Folks

Wilson, hisself, tried it an' found th' wire worked, but some others on hand also tried it—an' nuthin' doin'. Don't ast me how come, folks. All I kin say is, like Will Rogers, "All I knows is whut I sees with my own eyes."

Boss's jest read this over, an' his right paw's reachin' fer that new ink well he done bought after bustin' one 'longside my haid last month; but I ain't dodgin' this time.

No, sir, Ikey. I'm a Gawd-fearin' man what's got his incisors dug deep intuh th' real truth this time. Some says a willow stick, shaped th' same way, 'll do th' trick. Wilson hisself tol' me it did, fer him, an' thet he had tuh grip them two crooks so durned tight that, when he opened his paws, he was holdin' all th' bark what'd

(Continued on page 124)

BUY NO INSURANCE

until you learn about

POSTAL LIFE'S $1.00 A MONTH POLICY

DUE to conditions many people have been forced to give up their insurance, and many others feel that they can't afford any. To meet this situation Postal Life Insurance Company has designed this special Dollar-A-Month policy.

It is a unique policy in that it costs only $1.00 a month, no matter what your age may be, from 18 to 50 years. The amount of insurance that this dollar a month will buy, however, varies with the age. For example, at age 18 it will buy $1275 worth; at age 25, $1085; at age 30, $948; at age 35, $813. To find out what it will buy at your age see table below.

DESIGNED FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LET THEIR INSURANCE LAPSE OR WHO FEEL THEY CAN'T AFFORD ANY

The rate of $1.00 a month—less than 25c a week—is just one-half the permanent premium rate. In other words, because most men who have wives and families to support want to give them the utmost protection, at a rate they can afford during the next five years while conditions are improving, the premium for the first five years has been modified to one-half the permanent premium. From the sixth year on this policy costs you only the low rate permanent premium of $2.00 a month. This premium may be still further reduced by the dividends Postal pays you as earned and declared by the Company.

This exceptional policy, therefore, has a two-fold advantage. First, it costs you less during the next five years of transition to better times; and Second, at the beginning of the sixth year you start paying the $2.00 premiums—but based on the lower rates of your *present* age, not what it will be five years from today. Thus from the beginning you receive Old Line LEGAL RESERVE Insurance with cash values and standard policy provisions at a price you can afford.

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Note What $1 a Month Buys

Age.	Amt.	Age	Amt.
18	$1275	35	$813
19	1248	36	786
20	1221	37	759
21	1194	38	734
22	1167	39	708
23	1140	40	682
24	1112	41	657
25	1085	42	632
26	1057	43	607
27	1030	44	583
28	1003	45	559
29	976	46	535
30	948	47	512
31	921	48	489
32	894	49	467
33	866	50	445
34	840		

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Postal Life does business under the strict supervision of the New York State Insurance Department and is subject to the United States Postal Authorities everywhere.

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It's easy to buy this Dollar Policy by mail from Postal. The table below shows how much insurance a dollar will buy at your age. If you feel you can afford to spend $2.00 a month, you can buy twice as much, or $3.00 will buy three times as much, etc. Then fill in the coupon below and send it with your first month's premium to the Postal Life Insurance Company. That's all you do. You get your money back if your application is not accepted. You take no risk.

Don't turn over this page until you have clipped the coupon below—it may be the most important thing you have ever done. Tomorrow may be too late.

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My exact date and year of birth was.....

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I wish to pay a premium of ☐ $1. ☐ $2. ☐ $3. ☐ $.....

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(Continued from page 122)

been on them crooks, that th' tug was powerful.

It Won't Even Wiggle fer Me!

Fer me, puhsonal, th' blamed thing won't even wiggle, nohow. That's whut a water witch is, Ike. Try it. It's been used thousands o' times, all over our old West, with good an' pore results. Ain't nobody kin say what's happen. Depth is figgered by pacin' from whar yuh fust feels th' upend o' th' inverted "Y" jiggle tuh whar th' p'int is pullin' down with all its might. Number o' paces shows th' number o' feet yuh has tuh dig down, figgerin' a pace at three foot.

Well, well, next letter's signed Johnny West. Knowed a right good rider with that name, Johnny, up Montana way. Got perforated by a steer's horn, dark night, an's been missed ever since.

Yore picture's plumb right, range clothes an' all, too. From ol' Montana, eh? Shore makes me homesick, blizzards an' all. I kin fair smell them good al' plains, an' them Bear Paw mountains when I onct drove stock over 'long th' Milk River. Wonder ef yuh play as much poker in Havre, these days, kid? I l'arned a heap.

"Wet Stock"

Yuh wants tuh know what 'bout callin' cattle "Wet stock," eh? Don't wonder yuh asts, Johnny, even though yuh air a cowboy. It all come about thisaway, son. A heap o' cattle war drove up from Old Mexico, crossin' th' Rio Grande—rustled stuff. Well, arrivin' on th' north side o' th' Rio Grande, fellas got callin' them rustled cows "wet," as they shore was after swimmin' acrost. That's how come th' "Wet" part, Johnny.

But, since then, fellas has got usin' th' same word when referrin' tuh *any* rustled stock, cows, broncs an' sech. Ev'body out in th' cow country savvies th' word.

"Point," "Swing," and "Drag"

And so on we goes tuh next letter. Miss Mary O'Brien, o' Point Sidney, Massachusetts. Gee, Mary, th' ol' Americano terra firma whar our fust forefathers stomped cold feet! I seen some nice views o' yore country, 'while back, though, an' it's shore fine, purty's all git-out; like *you* in yore swell photygraph yuh sent along tuh th' boss.

How come yuh sent it addressed tuh him, 'stead o' me, gal? I got fust right in this yere ol' office tuh squint at ev'ry picture what comes in. Now yuh got 'im all stuck up like yuh'd radioed 'im a kiss. So yuh

(Continued on page 126)

"Stop Worrying . . .

NOW I CAN TELL YOU THE TRUE FACTS ABOUT SEX!

WOULD YOU like to know the *whole truth* about sex? All of the startling facts that even the frankest books have heretofore not dared to print are explained in clear, scientific manner, vividly illustrated, in the revolutionary book—"The New Eugenics". Here at last, the naked truth stands forth, stripped of all prudery and narrow prejudice. Old fashioned taboos are discarded and the subject of sex is brought out into the bright light of medical science by Dr. C. S. Whitehead M.D. and Dr. Charles A. Hoff, M.D., the authors!

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Sex appeal and sex satisfaction are the *most powerful forces* in your life. To remain in ignorance is to remain in danger of lifelong suffering. It is the purpose of this great book to show sex-ignorant men and women how to enjoy safely the thrilling experiences that are their birthright. It not only tells you how to *attract the opposite sex*, but also how to *hold the love of your mate* throughout a *blissful married life.*

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WILL FEAR

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SEX IS NO LONGER a mysterious sin, mentioned only in the conversational gutters—it is the most powerful force in the world and can be made the most beautiful. Thanks to this bravely written book, it is no longer necessary to pay the awful price for one moment of bliss. Science now lights the path to knowledge and lifelong sex happiness.

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Are you an *awkard novice* in the art of love-making or a master of its difficult technique? The art of love-making takes *skill* and *knowledge*. The sexual embrace as practiced by those ignorant of its true scientific importance is crude, awkward and *often terrifying* to more sensitive natures. Normal sex-suited people are torn apart because they lack the knowledge that makes for a happy sex life!

Sex Facts for Men and Women

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The Truth about Masturbation
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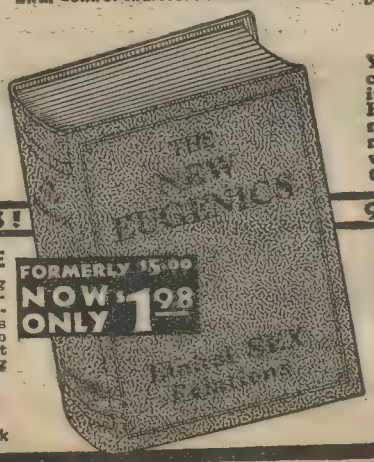
The Sexual Embrace
How to Build Virility
How to Gain Greater Delight
What to Allow a Lover To Do
Birth Control Chart for Married Women)



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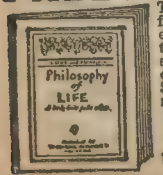

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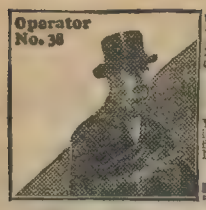

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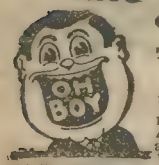

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(Continued from page 124)

wants to know what cowpuncher folks means when they uses th' words "Point," "Swing" an' "Drag," eh?

Now that's somethin' right clost tuh my heart, somethin' I've done knowed ever sence I war eight an' could swing a mean rope at tiny calves—what my ol' dad whaled th' life half out'n me fer doin'. Nobody ain't supposed tuh rope li'l baby calves not a week old. But I reckon kids allers will.

Keepin' 'Em Headin' Right

Well, Mary, it's just thisaway. When a trail herd's strung out 'long th' desert, we gotta keep 'em headin' right an' movin' right smart an' have somebody tuh stop any wanderin' off tuh right or left. So we shoves coupla fellas up front o' th' herd, on their broncs, as "Point" riders. 'Long th' sides o' th' herd we puts a few more, each side, tuh stop wanderin'. We call them riders our "Swing" men.

Then behind th' herd, shovin' th' whole works along, comes our "Drag" riders, who shoves forward th' slow cattle what'd drag back, turn away an' stop, thus gittin' left behind.

No, Mary, fella what wrote that yarn yuh read in that other magazine jest didn't know his stuff when he called "Point" men

(Concluded on page 128)

A MAGPIE TALKS

(Concluded from page 119)

paper?" asked one of the men excitedly.

The sheriff turned the paper over. The other side was a printed notice of the type sent out to the office of the sheriff in various counties and cities. Across the top it read: *"Wanted for Murder,"* and there was a picture and a detailed description of Dude Kohler.

"He must have known that I would get one of these," said Sheriff Johnny. "So he killed himself rather than be taken in, and tried to fix the blame on Terry."

"Rat," spoke up the man who was guarding Terry, repeating the word from the note Dude had written. "Yes, I think that 'rat' is the right word." He took the noose from Terry's neck as he spoke. "But the rat isn't Terry!"

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Here's where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example, if you have a camera and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera, No. 1, Jr., make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries.—John Smith, 49 Park Street, Albany, N. Y."

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Have typed copies of Dardanella's "Handbook of the Wilderness; A Guide for Hunter-Trader-Trapper." Will trade for coin, jewelry, anything worth fifty cents or more. Herman Clark, Henryville, Tenn.

Have all electric six-tube radio, complete boy scout uniform, both like new. Want smaller radio, electric or battery, or motorcycle. Junior Poirier, 240 Lewis Street, Duluth, Minn.

Have old Edison small Gem phonograph, books, etc. Want old deeds, catalogs, pictures, certificates, maps, before 1900. John Kapsask, S. Sellersville, Pa.

Twenty-five word ad in Hobby Gem for two hundred mixed foreign stamps, or U. S. precancels. Robert Kostillo, 513 Main Street, Benwood, West Va.

Have used books, good condition, on all subjects. Will swap for new books on any subjects. What have you? Bob Peruinich, 3515 W. 60 Place, Chicago, Ill.

Have books, violin, radios, film developing outfit, cigar bands, periodicals, etc. Want pets, radios, field glasses, etc. Accept almost anything. Send your list for mine. William Davey Bence, 152 Mather Street, Hamden, Conn.

Have one new 110 volt, 700 watt A. C. generator. Will trade for good motorcycle. Russel Stone, Athensville, Illinois.

Have used fishing rod, 8" telescope, stamp collection, eight volumes African game trail books. Want: Zeiss German officer's glasses. Bruno Percoky, 43 Chapin Street, Holyoke, Mass.

Will swap 800 feet of 35 M. M. Newsreel for picture machine for short wave radio or field glasses, or what have you? Ed Greene, Coward, S. C.

Will trade fifteen rare foreign stamps for Indian head penny; sixty foreign, thirty U. S. for each Liberty head nickel received. Unlimited stamp supply. Charles Kendall, 7022 Belclare Rd., Dundalk, Md.

Have grey rabbit two month old. Want things from World War. Paul Vautrot, 187 Pinehurst Avenue, New York City.

Will trade twenty U. S. stamps, all different, with five stock exchange stamps for seven foreign coins. Roy Mitchell, 3306 Crescent Street, Long Island City, New York.

Have complete N. S. T. A. salesmanship course. Excellent condition. Will trade for sports equipment, or what have you? Raymond Moss, Box 132, Vandalia, Mo.

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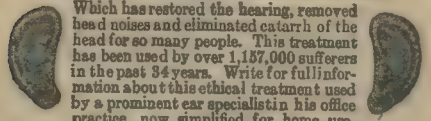

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(Concluded from page 126)

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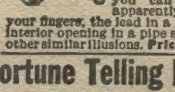

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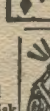

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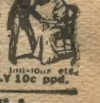

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